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THE OLD BOY OF TOMBSTONE; Or, WAGERING A LIFE ON A CARD.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "EQUINOX TOM," "SOL SCOTT," "ALABAMA JOE," "JACK RABBIT," "CAPTAIN COOL-BLADE," "PACIFIC PETE," "OLD '49,"
"THREE-FINGERED JACK," "THE LONG-HAIRED PARDS," "JOAQUIN, THE SADDLE KING," ETC., ETC.



"THAR SHE BE! NOW LET FLICKER! BET YE MISS THE KEERD!" MOCKINGLY CRIED THE OLD BOY.

The Old Boy of Tombstone;

OR

Wagering a Life on a Card.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "THE PIRATE OF THE PLACERS,"
"OLD '49," "SWEET WILLIAM," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

MAGIC OR TRICKERY.

"NOT this evening, nor here, Peter Papagon. Go home and let Nancy Topack put your head to soak in her wash-tub."

"Gimme drink; got to hev it."

"Can't be did, Peter. You've got more sail now than you can carry with a level keel."

"Gimme drink, 'fore I git up on my ear an' kick the hull durned consarn west-end-an'-crooked!"

"Once more, not a drop!" firmly. "I run this place to make money, but I never have, and I never shall, sell liquor to a drunken man."

"Who's drunk?"

"You are, Peter; so drunk that you've lost what little wits Dame Nature ever blessed you with. Sober, you're a decent sort of fellow, but Peter drunk is a nuisance to the community. You see yonder hole in the wall? Just imagine the lovely Nancy Topack stands there, awaiting your coming with a smile on her rosy lips, a love-light in her eyes of jet, and a clothes-paddle in her tiny fist. Imagine—and march!"

Early night in the young mining-camp of Tombstone. Named in grim jest by the bold explorers whose friends declared they were prospecting for a tombstone instead of a fortune, the title was confirmed by those who followed on the heels of the rich strike; and justly, for seldom has an appellation proved more appropriate than this. "Cold meat" for breakfast, dinner and supper, with an occasional free lunch of dead men sandwiched in between the regular courses by way of an appetizer, and to break the dull monotony.

The great majority of these were the natural outcome of bad whisky or card disputes, but now and then there occurred a tragedy with a deeper significance underlying it, and it is with one of the latter class that we now have to deal.

In the late summer of 1879, a little more than one year after the first blast was fired in the Tombstone district—a little less than two years after the Schieffelin boys discovered silver in what is now Cochise county, Arizona—the chief "show-place" in that lugubriously-named place was "Dianthe's Bower." Not alone because it was one of the first, as well as largest and most substantial, adobe buildings erected in the fated-to-become city; not only because it had the reputation of dealing the squarest game of faro in the territory; but because it was built, owned and operated by a woman—the first of the fair sex to venture thither.

Who she was, from whence she came, or what her name—other than that which gleamed forth from the long transparency now suspended above the door of the "Bower"—was an enigma which none of the curious had as yet solved. But on another scarcely less-important point, there was far less trouble in arriving at a satisfactory conclusion.

Though she ran a gambling establishment, Dianthe was a woman not to be insulted with impunity. The very first night the Bower was flung open to the public, she was forced to wing a drunken, foul-mouthed cur; and then, with one little foot planted upon the neck of the groaning, groveling wretch, she made a brief speech which was never forgotten by those into whose ears it was poured. Though a gambler, she was an honest woman, and one who knew how to take care of herself. The proof lay beneath her feet. The rough audience could see for themselves, and with one wild cheer, they fastened upon the wounded wretch, to drag him forth and hang him to the sign before the door for having dared to insult a lady. As quickly they relaxed their grasp; and the beautiful fury who had just shot this man down now defended him with the same weapon.

From that hour Dianthe was the idol of Tombstone, and her establishment was a model of order. If a strange pilgrim ventured to start a row therein, he was instantly squelched by some of her volunteer aides.

A few moments before we draw up the curtain on this little drama, the swinging screen-door in front of the bar was thrust open, and a rough-looking fellow staggered into the Bower, uttering a hiccupping yell as he did so.

Early though the hour was, a goodly number of players were gathered around the tables beyond, and they glanced toward the new-comer. They recognized him, and the hands which had mechanically moved toward pistol-butts once more returned to cards or ivory chips, for all there knew Peter Papagon, and believed him harmless as a new-born babe.

Dianthe alone moved toward him, for she saw that Peter was drunk. Her hand touched his shoulder as he staggered up against the counter

demanding whisky. Soft and musical, but determined, were her tones as she uttered the words with which this story opens.

With a drunken lurch, Peter Papagon flung off her hand. There was a strange, glassy look in his blue eyes, as he responded. His voice was strained and unnatural, scarce raised above a whisper. He seemed like a man talking, moving under a spell.

Almost a giant in height and breadth, but with all members so admirably proportioned that his extreme tallness did not strike a casual observer, unless a comparison was made with some other of known height.

A well-shaped head, covered with long hair of a soft-brown hue, fine and silken almost as that of a child. A corn-colored beard and pair of mustaches almost covered his face, leaving only his curved nose, blue eyes, and broad, high, white forehead exposed to view. It was a face that would have been fairly beautiful, only for the vacant look in the eyes. That went far to justify the general opinion that Peter Papagon was only "half-baked."

Even more remarkable-looking, when the surroundings are taken into consideration, was the young woman who confronted the giant.

Barely above the medium height of her sex, with a plump, well-rounded figure, "built from the ground up"—as one of her devoted, if distant admirers affirmed; a pure blonde in type, with golden hair, blue eyes; a complexion of almost dazzling purity, pearly teeth imprisoned within brilliantly red lips; a dress of light, fleecy sky-blue stuff; diamonds flashing in ears, at throat and over her brow; and—startling contrast!—a gold-studded belt encircling the trim waist, supporting a brace of pearl-handled revolvers, small in size, but deadly enough when handled rightly.

Sharp and clear came the last words, and one plump hand pointed commandingly to the door, but Peter Papagon stared at her with a fishy look in his blue eyes, as he sought to steady his swaying figure by spreading his legs further apart.

"Shall I bounce him, Captain Di?" asked the barkeeper, making a move as though to come from behind the counter.

"No; keep your place. When I want help, I'll ask it," was the sharp response.

"Gimme a drink, an' I'll go quiet—no! durned ef I do!" and a red light suddenly shot into the fishy eyes. "The Old Boy's given me a grip, an' he says I've got to do it!"

"Do what, you drunken brute?"

"Take a hug an' a kiss! Nancy'll give me blazes, but I cain't help that! Whoa, Emma! Durn it all! cain't ye stand still, an' take it like a man?"

His long arms swung clumsily around as though to inclose the dainty figure and clasp it to his brawny breast, but with a sharp little cry of angry surprise, Dianthe started back and avoided the drunken onset.

"Back! idiot! Are you bent on committing suicide?" she panted, her lovely face transformed into that of a veritable fury, her soft, liquid eyes glowing like balls of molten steel.

Startled exclamations from the room beyond, accompanied by the oversetting of more than one chair, told plain enough that the alarm had been taken by the gamblers, but Peter Papagon heeded neither this nor the rapid trampling of feet.

In good sooth, it seemed as though the devil possessed the usually quiet and harmless fellow. Unwarned by the sharp, menacing tone in which the fair gambler spoke, the leering grin only deepened upon his face, and he recovered his balance, only to repeat his bold attempt.

Dianthe wheeled swiftly as she heard the cries of the men who were hastening to her assistance, and one of her white jeweled hands was flung out toward them imperiously.

"Stop! The man who fires a shot without my orders dies like a dog, and by my hand! I ask no help to subdue a drunken fool."

"Cain't help it; he says I got to do it!" grunted the drunken rough, lurching forward and clutching Dianthe, even as her sharply uttered speech saved him from being riddled by a score of bullets.

The lithe, quivering figure was drawn almost to his broad bosom. His silken beard fairly crushed her face as his head was lowered and his lips protruded to snatch the kiss; but then, with a swift and agile motion, Dianthe slipped out of his grasp and leaped back a pace or two, her right hand clasping a cocked revolver.

The very personification of insulted fury and vengeance she appeared then, and a gasping breath broke from the spectators as they looked to see the giant drop in a lifeless heap, with a bullet through his brain.

Peter Papagon alone failed to realize his peril. He reeled to and fro in the effort to recover his balance, with that vacant, stupefied look in his eyes. In a low, husky monotone, he muttered:

"Whoa, Emma! Stan' still an' take it like a little man. Don't ye hear what the Old Boy is tellin' me? 'Hug an' kiss 'er—hug an' kiss 'er! Steady by jerks, an' quit yer squarmin'! Let up on yer floatin' back an' yender! Got to do

it, even ef I hev to spit on my finger an' stick ye fast, like a buck Ute corralin' a flea!"

"Can I be of any assistance, madam?" uttered a clear, pleasant voice close to Dianthe's elbow. "Give me permission, and that overgrown rascal shall never trouble you again."

Dianthe flashed a swift glance over her shoulder, and a strange light came into her glowing eyes as they rested on the speaker. Did she hesitate? If so, it was only for a moment.

"Thanks; but I am competent to take care of myself."

"Look out!" sharply cried the stranger. "He means mischief."

Swift as thought Dianthe turned upon Peter Papagon, finger on trigger, but the drunken rough made no effort to molest her further.

Instead, he stood erect and steady as a rock. All traces of drunkenness had vanished as by magic. The feverish flush had fled from his face, leaving it marble white. His blue eyes looked dull and glassy, more like those of a dead than a living man. His limbs, his entire person, seemed rigid, as though some strange power had suddenly transformed him from living, breathing flesh and blood into a statue of stone.

For a brief space the flashing eyes of the gambler-queen threatened instant death above the leveled tube, but as Peter Papagon stared glassily back, never a muscle quivering with fear, the lurid light in her eyes softened, though the polished tube maintained its steady level.

"It's the bad whisky that's most to blame. I know that, or you would be past earthly mercy now, Peter Papagon," she said, speaking slowly, impressively. "I'll give you one more chance. Down upon your knees and beg my pardon for the foul insult you have attempted!"

Rigid as a block of stone Peter stood before her. Not a muscle moved to show that he heard or heeded her.

"Down, dog!" sharply rung forth the voice of the gambler queen, and the blue eyes assumed a reddish tinge. "For the last time, down on your knees and beg my pardon, or a bullet shall help you!"

"It cain't be did, lady an' gents!" came a shrill, peculiar voice from the entrance, and a tall figure pushed open the screen. "His knee-jints 'd snap off like pipestems ef ye was to try to bend 'em now. You'd see that fer yourself ef boy Pete could bear ye ax him."

"What do you mean?" sharply demanded Dianthe.

"Jess what I say, ma'am," and the white-crowned head was bent in a low bow, as the new-comer doffed his hat. "The boy don't mind, 'ca'se he cain't hear ye. Struck dumb, ye see. He looks like a healthy chunk of a man, I don't gainsay, but fer all that, he ain't. He's a machine, like them monkey toys which ye wind up an' set a goin' to 'muse the babies, an' I'm the critter as owns the key which sets him off!"

A queer speech, and a still more curious speaker.

Something above the common height of men, but appearing even taller from his attenuated frame and the peculiar manner in which he was dressed, all in black, his long-tailed coat buttoning close to the throat, completely hiding his linen, if such he wore. Black thread gloves covered his hands and long, slender fingers, while his feet were incased in cloth gaiters of the same somber hue.

Nor was this the only peculiarity about him. From his uncovered head descended long silken locks of snow-white hair, curling like those of a woman. His face was smooth shorn but in it lay the most startling contrast of all.

To match the snow-white hair, it should have been pale, thin, wrinkled; instead, it was the face of a school-boy, plump and rosy. There was a dimple in each cheek, and another in the round chin. The lips were red and plump. His beaming smile disclosed teeth white and even, plainly of nature's own growth, instead of art's cunning handiwork.

Yet one more notable fact, where all men—and women, too, for that matter—went well-armed; not a weapon was visible about his person.

"I don't understand you—nor do I care to make the attempt," said Dianthe, impatiently, with an outward fling of one hand. "This fellow insulted me, and he must beg my pardon, or suffer the consequences."

"Peter, you ongainly critter, what hev you to say? Be you guilty or innercent? Speak out!"

"I jest did what the devil putt into my head," came slowly and mechanically from the lips of the fellow, though he still stood rigid as ever, with that peculiar, glassy stare in his eyes. "He said 'hug an' kiss 'er—hug an' kiss 'er!'"

"Fer shame, Peter!" and the man in black rolled up his eyes in an expression of horror. "Jest think what your darlin' Nancy would say an' do ef it ever comes to her ears!"

"Enough of this!" cried Dianthe, sharply. "Once more, Peter Papagon, down on your knees and beg my pardon!"

"He would ef he could, but he cain't, ma'am."

"Silence!" and the beautiful fury turned

upon him. "I'm running this show, if you please. Chip in again, and I'll call you with a leaden stake! And you, Peter Papagon—last turn! When I count ten, I'll shoot!"

Sharp and clear her voice enunciated the numbers, but not a moving muscle showed that Peter heard them. Then—the leveled weapon exploded with a ringing report!

CHAPTER II.

THE OLD BOY AT PLAY.

A LOW cry that was scarcely more than a gasping breath, ran through the crowd of eager on-lookers, as Peter Papagon stood stiff and erect, seemingly untouched, unharmed, though the exploding pistol was not more than two yards from his head. He did not even turn his face toward the beautiful fury, but stared straight ahead of him with that strange, glassy look in his protruding eyes.

And yet the bullet of the gambler queen had not varied a single hair's breadth from her aim. Just breaking the skin, the missile whistled past the tip of the giant's nose, expending its force on the dry mud walls beyond. A little red drop collected on the end of Peter's nose, then dropped down on his waving beard, making room for its fellow. The pain must have been considerable, the nerve-shock still more trying, yet not the slightest change of expression or quivering muscle, told that Peter felt either.

A low, oily chuckle broke from the man in black as the gambler queen lowered her weapon and started back with a cry of wonder.

"You think I was givin' of ye taffy, ma'am, when I said that yairthquakes couldn't move Peter Popgun, nor yit thunderbolts make him hear a word that I didn't whisper into his alabaster year."

Dianthe turned impetuously upon the speaker, her blue eyes flashing dangerously, her revolver half raised.

"Who are you? What brought you here? What devilish spell have you cast over this poor brute? Speak—and quickly!"

"D'y' mind that, now?" and the man in black beamed benevolently around upon the spectators, one gloved hand gracefully indicating the gambler queen. "Takes a lady to sling questions at a feller-critter! Three big double-enders all in a breath, an' never a stop fer 'freshments.'"

"You'll find that a lady can sling something more than questions, if you try me any further!" snapped Dianthe. "Once more I ask you—what is your name?"

"Professor Joralemon Giltedge Quack."

"Professor of what—humbug?"

The round, rosy face lengthened, and a reproachful light filled the blue eyes.

"Now, ma'am, is that fair? I leave it to your own self. Take a look at this subject. See that drop o' ruby gently distillin' from the end o' his bugle. Think o' the kind o' corkscrew you used to turn on that top. It was done the slickest I ever see'd, fer a woman, but did Peter flinch? Did he tumble down an' kick up an' go into a conniption-fit? An' wouldn't he 'a' did that or somethin' to that effect ef thar hed bin any humbug into the game? Echo answers, bet yer sweet life he jest would!"

"What have you to do with him? What connection is there between you two?" demanded Dianthe.

"He's a subject that I tuck a notion to 'speriment onto, an' I reckon he'll pan out fust-chop, too. Ye see, ma'am, an' you, gents, afore ye a humble professor o' mejumistic spiritooalogy—ef ye kin cipher out what that means. Think some o' gittin' up a circle in this burg, to make fun fer the boys an' gals, as well as to put a few shekels into my pockets. Not that I need the dust; I've got more now than I know what to do with it; but jest to make the thing more bindin'. What a man don't pay fer, he don't think wuth the trouble o' keepin' the run of. But that ain't the pint, jest now," he added, hastily, as Dianthe made an impatient gesture.

"Peter Popgun, turn your ruby-tipped mug this a-way. Kin you hear my sweet voice?"

"Yes, boss," came the slow, hollow response.

"Peter, you're a sarcus actor, jest now. Show this lady an' these gents how slick you kin stand on your other eend."

Not a muscle in the countenance of the giant changed; the glassy, far-away look still filled his eyes; but his joints unstiffened, and bending over, he rested his head upon the floor, supported by his outstretched hands, and kicked up his heels. For one instant they waved wildly in the air, and then the grinning, laughing spectators scattered as he fell over with a crashing jar.

"Once more, Peter!" cried the man in black, sharply. "An' be keeful how you bring disgrace onto yer ring-master!"

Still with stony, unmoved countenance, the giant essayed the ridiculous feat. The professor raised one hand, working his long fingers swiftly. Higher rose the quivering legs and mighty feet. Swifter worked the black fingers, and then, stiff and statue-like as he had stood upon his feet, Peter Papagon remained poised upon his crown.

"Thar ye be, Peter! Stay putt ontel I say let up," with a parting wave of his long digits,

as he turned with a bland smile to the amused spectators.

"Thar you hev a mericle, ma'am, an' you, gents. A little one for a cent, but still a mericle none the less. What makes Peter boy stan' onto his cabeza? 'Tain't beca'se his head is the heaviest, fer a emptier pate I never see in all my travels. Look at them hoofs! 'Longside them a mud scow wouldn't be more'n a tit on a hog. That's whar the mericle comes in—that they don't over-come-tumble him an' break his fool neck. Why don't he? That's fer me ter know an' you to find out—ef ye kin!"

As he spoke, Professor Quack pressed one hand against the rigid form, swaying it to one side until the straight shape assumed an angle of fifty degrees. He removed his hand, but, instead of toppling over, Peter remained thus, unsupported.

A murmur of surprise rewarded the bland professor.

Bowing low, he extended his hand, slowly moving it to and fro, but without touching his subject. In perfect time the rigid form swayed back and forth, with his head for a pivot, like an inverted pendulum to some fantastic clock. A few moments thus, then, with a swift uplifting of his potent hand, Professor Quack caused Peter to resume his former position, feet upward, stiff and rigid as a post.

"Thar's the mericle, ma'am, an' you, gents," said Quack, with a low bow. "Ef anythin' was to happen to me so that I couldn't say the word, or make the pass, Peter Popgun would stan' thar like that, wrong eend up, ontel the crack o' doom."

"That's too thin!" grunted a ragged, greasy-looking fellow from among the crowd. "Bet ye dollar he'll git down ef I say so, 'nd I won't give him much of a push, nuther!"

He did not wait for an answer, but, leaping forward, gave the upright figure a tremendous shove, uttering a yell of triumph as it swayed forward until the feet almost touched the floor with its toes. But then, swift as thought, the massive limbs and huge feet swung back, doubling at the knees and striking the bumper full on the crown, crushing him to the floor as though felled with a mallet.

The next instant those retributive legs were drawn upright, and Peter Papagon was once more a statue.

Mingling with mirth and amazement came a cold, sneering laugh from the lips of the stranger who had first offered to assist the gambler queen.

"Pretty well played, old boy, but isn't it about time to change the programme? Your pard will suffer from a rush of brains to the head ef you don't turn him other end up."

Professor Quack gazed steadily into the handsome, scoffing face of the speaker for a moment. A peculiar light came into his blue eyes as he spoke:

"You don't 'pear to take any stock into the mericle?"

"Possibly because I cut my eye-teeth long ago, and can look as far through the hole in a mill-stone as the next best man. Come! enough of this nonsense! You are blocking the game, and I, for one, take more interest in the cards than I do in this clumsy trickery."

"You think it ain't ginooine? You reckon that this man an' me is in cahoots, playin' bugs onto the lady an' gents?"

"I don't 'think,' I know it. Madam," turning swiftly to the gambler queen, with his tones now soft and respectful, "if you will grant me permission, I'll soon unmask and expose this brace of impostors."

"Tell him yes, ma'am," quickly interposed Professor Quack. "I've bin a heap troubled to know who an' what I raaly be, an' ef he kin 'lighten me, it'll be a mighty favor!"

"If you are both willing, I have no objection," slowly responded Dianthe. "One thing; you must not injure that poor fellow," glancing toward Peter Papagon. "He has conducted himself very strangely to-night, but I do not think he means anything wrong, and he has a friend whose feelings I would not have hurt."

"Your wish is my law, lady," with a graceful bow. "I believe that these two fellows are playing a cunning trick on us, for some covert end of their own. I mean to make them board their cards, mesmerism or not."

"Peter, flip-flop!" cried out the professor.

Doubling up like a jack-knife, until his huge feet touched the floor, Papagon elevated the upper portion of his body with a jerk that threatened to dislocate his back. Stiff and rigid he stood once more, staring vacantly before him, as it happened, direct into the rueful face of the bumper whose unexpected downfall had created such mirth among the audience.

A malicious twinkle filled the professor's eyes, and with one stride of his thin legs, he reached the side of the fellow and grasped his shoulder. The bumper shrunk away, but those long black fingers flashed before his eyes, and a pallor stole through the thick coating of dirt and grease, while a look of horror filled the bloodshot eyes.

"Peter!" cried the professor, sharply.

"Yes, boss," muttered the possessed one.

"Look! Nancy has come to meet you. See! she holds out her arms—she puts up her lips.

Peter, you rascal, cain't you take a hint like that?"

"Nancy!" muttered Peter, striding forward and flinging his arms around the bumper. "Don't you hear him? 'Hug 'an kiss 'er—hug 'an kiss 'er!'"

Kicking, scratching, struggling to escape from that anaconda like hug, the bumper fought fiercely, but in vain. That mighty grip lifted his feet clear of the floor. The blood-streaked beard was rubbed against his twisting face, as the giant rained hot kisses upon it, as he muttered huskily:

"Take it easy, Nancy, do! 'Tain't me that's doin' of it all, honey! Don't yer hear him? 'Hug 'an kiss 'er—hug 'an kiss 'er! Oh oo! honey!" and he gave the bumper a quivering, ecstatic hug that pumped out a groaning grunt from the well-nigh dislocated ribs. "I cain't help it; he makes me—the Old Boy, you know!"

The crowd was nearly wild with mirth, yelling and cheering on the giant, who seemed all unconscious of the uproar, intent only on performing the whimsical part allotted him by the self-styled professor.

The gambler queen lost her frown in a smile as she viewed the supremely ridiculous scene, and the brows of the handsome stranger corrugated sharply as he made an impatient gesture.

The keen, restless eye of Professor Quack noted this, and once more his long, black fingers flashed in the air.

"Enough's enough, an' too much is a plenty, Peter. Let Nancy go back to her wash-tub, now, an' you brace up an' be a man ag'in, jest fer to-night, as the poic says."

With a parting hug and a kiss, that seemed to spread all over the gasping, struggling bumper's face, Peter Papagon relaxed his loving grasp, and his victim fled from the room with the yells and laughter of the convulsed crowd following him.

Professor turned abruptly to the stranger, saying:

"We are ready if you are, mister man. Which'll you begin with, an' what's the fust test you perpose?"

"One moment," said the stranger, imperiously cutting the other short with a wave of his hand. "A lady has been insulted in her own place of business. If that fellow is simply drunk, he is accountable for what he has done; if he is playing off, acting under your instructions—as I firmly believe—you are the most guilty one; and, as this lady has kindly consented to leave her case in my hands, and with you I mean to settle. As the first step, I'll make him acknowledge the petty trickery; the second—Time enough for that."

"Dew tell!" drawled the professor, with comically uplifted eyebrows. "I want to know! Peter, I reckon we better begin fer to say our pra'rs, while the lamp containners fer to burn, or we'll git left out in the cold—sure!"

For the first time the giant appeared to hesitate, one hand going up to his head and scratching it dubiously.

The crowd was just at that stage where everything looks like a joke, and this was regarded as the most whimsical one of all, whether intended as such or not.

His lip curling, the stranger turned toward the barkeeper, speaking sharp and clear:

"Johnny, mix me up an Arizona cocktail—in your best style, for this performing John donkey. He deserves a treat, after amusing us so long."

Grinning broadly, in unison with the delighted spectators, the barkeeper proceeded to comply with this request.

To the uninitiated, a few words in this connection will not come amiss.

Just when, or by what grim humorist, that peculiar compound known as an "Arizona cocktail" was first invented, is wrapped in impenetrable mystery, but that it had, and still has an existence, is an undoubted fact. Concerning its birth, tradition hath this:

A high and mighty fellow, probably a pilgrim fresh from the benighted East, entered an Arizona saloon, and without inviting all present to join him in his pleadings at the bar, called for a drink, and stood by, gracefully sipping it. Even the veteran "Johnny" behind the bar stood aghast at his unparalleled audacity, but then one of the cowboys rose to the occasion, and the Arizona cocktail found birth. Sober as a deacon at prayers, the barkeeper mixed the compound precisely as directed, the pilgrim looking on in steadily growing wonder at the frightful taste displayed by his grim neighbor, never dreaming what the sequel was to be. A moment later he was staring into the muzzle of a cocked revolver, and a stern voice was ordering him to drink. In vain he protested. The cowboy would listen to no argument. A bitter insult had been offered, and there was only one alternative—a bullet.

Thus the Arizona cocktail found birth, and it still flourishes, as many a careless or stingy bibber has discovered to his sorrow.

Johnny deftly performed his duty. Into a huge glass he tipped a trifle of each sort of liquor which the bar afforded, being especially generous with the bottles of pepper-sauce and bitters. Into this he stirred a spoonful of cay-

enne, and another of salt. A piece of rusty bacon was cut up into bits and dropped into the glass, which was then filled half full with coal-oil. Opening a box with gingerly care, he produced therefrom an egg, slipping it into the glass without breaking. Grasping a long stick, with an abrupt curve at the end, he stood at arm's length from the glass as he lightly tapped the over-ripe hen-fruit. With a report, the frail shell broke, and a disgusting odor rose on the air, amid the laughing cheers of the crowd.

"Bid your giant drink that cocktail, professor," said the handsome stranger, with a cold, sneering smile. "If he is as completely beneath your influence as you try to make us believe, he will not object. Should he do so—then my next test will more closely concern you!"

"Looks like playin' it rather low down on a pore critter what ain't a'countable fer what he does, ain't ye?"

"Either that, or own up that you and he are both frauds of the first water; take your choice!"

The blue eyes flashed, and a sickly smile crept over the strangely boyish-looking face, and an instant silence fell over the crowd as they believed a tragedy was about to take the place of the farce. But only for a moment. Then, in the old, peculiar voice, Professor Quack turned to the giant, saying:

"Peter, you've bin a mighty good boy so fur this evenin', an' you deserve a 'ward o' merit. Right about! Face the bar! H'ist that glass, an' look at me! *Steady!*"

With the stiff, ungainly movements of an automaton, the giant obeyed these orders, taking the glass and facing his master without a change of countenance, though the majority of the spectators were forced to hold both their breaths and noses as the vile-smelling compound was agitated in the glass.

"Peter, put that glass to your beak, an' take a good long smell. Now tell the ma'am an' gents what it 'minds ye of."

For a brief space the giant hesitated, then said:

"It smells some like Nancy did, jest now, when I was huggin' of her."

The conclusion of this sentence was lost in the burst of laughter with which the room echoed, but Peter stood there as though he had lost his ears as well as his will-power, not a muscle changing as he waited for further instructions.

"Taste it, Peter, but dip lightly. Easy by jerks, boy, fer it ain't every day that you run across sech a ginerous gent as the one which pays fer your grog this trip, an' it'll maybe be some time afore you taste the like ag'in. Jest a sip."

In this, as in all else, Peter obeyed, sipping the horrible compound, then smacking his lips as though after the most delicious draught.

The stranger was watching closely, anticipating some effort at deception, and he bit his lip sharply as he saw that there was none, that the cocktail was tasted without the slightest sign of repugnance; rather the contrary.

A peculiar smile crossed the boyish face of the professor as he noted the act, but he made no comment; and his voice was soft and purring as he added:

"Tell the gents what it tastes like, Peter, boy."

Again that brief hesitation, then the slow response:

"Like butterflies an' hummin'-birds soaked in honey!"

There was no laugh this time from the spectators. Instead, they interchanged glances, and those who chanced to stand nearest the professor mechanically increased their distance. Nearly every man present knew Peter Papagon more or less intimately. An honest fellow, not over-gifted with brains perhaps, but that very fact rendered him all the less likely to be capable of carrying out a deception such as the stranger appeared to think this remarkable scene.

Perhaps there was something in the wild rumors they had heard concerning this old man with the face of a boy; maybe he was, indeed, the "Old Boy," as Peter termed him.

The keen-eyed stranger saw this change of opinion, and the red flush which came into his face for a moment, told that it cut him sharp, though the telltale color as quickly faded.

Professor Quack bowed low before him, then said:

"Air you satisfied, mister man? Hes this test gone fur enough to suit ye? Think ye got the wuth o' your money?"

"Tell him to swallow that cocktail, then I'll talk with you," sharply.

"Peter, you hear what the kind gent says! Down with it, boy, an' say thank 'ee fer the treat."

The cocktail vanished at a single gulp, and nodding his head at vacancy, Peter Papagon jerked out the dictated words.

"Does that satisfy your honor'ble honor?" demanded the professor, smiling blandly.

"That you are more of a mesmerist than I gave you credit for being at first; yes," was the cool response. "No man in full possession of his senses, could have swallowed that dose, without turning wrong side out."

"That settles it, an' I 'cept your 'pology."

"Wait until I make one!" sharply interposed the stranger, frowning. "A lady has been insulted. We all see that yonder poor devil is not accountable for his actions. You have taken particular pains to show us that he can only act and speak according as you will. That makes you the real offender, and as such—"

"I will call him to account, if I consider a reckoning necessary," interjected Dianthe, one hand resting lightly on the stranger's shoulder, while a soft smile tempered the abruptness of her speech. "I can see now, that it was all a jest—stupid, perhaps, but not serious enough to quarrel over. Oblige me by letting the matter drop."

"You have the right to command, lady," bowing gracefully, "and of course I yield. Some day, perhaps, this worthy professor of the black arts will have an opportunity to know me a trifle better."

A low, mocking laugh came from Jeralemon Giltedge Quack.

"Peter, brace up. Take a look at the gent. Look straight an' look hard. You see him?"

"Yes, boss."

"Did you ever see him afore this evenin'?"

"Not as I knows on," was the slow response.

"Kin you tell us his name an' his perfession—what he does fer a livin', I mean?"

"The name he uses now, or that which he rasly—"

"Drop that foolery!" cried the stranger, his face pale and livid as that of a corpse, while his eyes flashed with a lurid light. "Enough of that nonsense."

From whence it came not one of the astonished spectators could say, but a cocked revolver flashed in the outstretched right hand of Professor Quack, the muzzle staring the stranger full in the face as his hand dropped to his belt.

"Easy by jerks, mister man!" hissed the man in black, his blue eyes glittering like balls of polished steel in the lamp light. "I ain't much on the shoot, but I don't 'low a pizen critter like you to git the drop on me—not any! You've hed your deal. It's my turn now. Leave it to the crowd. Did I kick over the traces when you was crackin' the whip? Didn't I let you run the sarcus pritty much as you pleased? To be course I did, an' now I'm goin' to fiddle fer you to dance by. Ain't that fair, gents?"

An assenting cry came from the crowd, and the stranger smiled scornfully as he heard the muttered comments which followed. He was no novice, and knew that he could only float with the tide for the present.

"Go on with your mummery, old boy. We'll settle up when the play is over," he said, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"Jest as the notion takes you on that 'count, stranger," was the placid response. "I never run away from a man I owed, an' I'm gittin' too old to larn new tricks now. I'll settle in any fashion you like. Not that I've any grudge ag'in you. Fure ez I kin tell now, I never sot eyes onto ye afore this evenin'. I don't know your name, your trade, nor nothin'. I ain't over anxious to larn, nuther. But from the start you've sneered at my little tricks. You've said in your face, as well as with your mouth, that I'm a fraud an' a 'poster. That is a blow at my pocket, fer I 'spect to git up a class here, an' ef I don't prove that I'm what I claim who'll come to it! Echo answers, not a durned galoot!"

"Mind ye, I don't say that thar's anythin' in your past life that you've any 'casion to hide. You might hev a dozen names, an' yit not hev changed them fer fear o' the hangman. I've traveled onder a heap o' titles myself, as I dar' say some more o' the gents as is within hearin' o' my gentle voice this minnit hes did, but that ain't no sign we're runnin' away from justice."

"Cut it short!" snapped the stranger, sharply.

"The shufflin' is 'most done. Peter'll deal out the keards. I jest wanted to say that we won't go any deeper'n the name you kerry now—not because I reckon thar's anythin' nasty onderneath but because that'll be enough to convince you that I ain't the fraud you 'pear to think."

"Peter, hev you tuck a good look at the gent?"

"I kin see right through him es though he was built out o' glass," was the response.

"Tell the gent his name."

"Carl Sherwood."

"His perfesh?"

"Flippin' pasteboards. Red-hot at 'em, too!"

"Stick to your kittykasm, Peter; don't branch off that-a-way, or you mought strike a lead which the gent wants to keep to his own self. Tention, Peter! What brung the gent to these parts? Not his legs, or the stage, but fer what eend?"

Peter hesitated before replying, and an uneasy expression crept into his face.

"Somethin's keepin' me from speakin' the words that's on the tip eend o' my tongue. 'Pears like they was a plaster stuck over my mouth!"

Carl Sherwood laughed shortly, but gazed still more intently into the flushed countenance of the giant, his eyes glittering like those of a basilisk.

He was pitting his power of will against that of the man in black, and it seemed as though he would conquer.

The gambler queen was standing close beside him, gazing at him intently, her curiosity plainly awakened. What she saw, may be briefly summed up as follows.

A man apparently in the prime of life, both as regards age and bodily powers; something under two score, it seemed. But little above the mean bight of mankind, with a figure which was the perfection of athletic grace, a face handsome as that of a demi-god, dark in complexion, with features clear-cut and almost classic in their regularity. His eyes were black as jet, keen and penetrating. His garb that of a gentleman in easy circumstances. His belt of weapons rich and serviceable at the same time.

The professor divined the truth, and turned his gaze upon the giant. Instantly the cloud vanished, and he said:

"I kin see, now. The gent come here because he hearn that thar was a big game, squar' dealt. He hes swore to tackle it an' git the best o' the tussle."

"Is that his only reason fer comin' to Tombstone?"

"No. He hearn o' Dianthe, an' come to see her."

"Stop! you dog!" cried Sherwood, angrily, as a little laugh ran around the room. "I'll tear out your tongue."

"Peter ain't to blame, mister man," interposed Quack. "He jest said what I willed him to."

"And who the devil are you?" snapped Sherwood.

"You hit it fust shot, pard," blandly. "I be the devil—or sense thar's a lady present, say the *Old Boy!*"

"Old fraud, rather."

"Peter, go set down in the corner an' rest yourself fer a bit," then turning blandly to Sherwood. "Did I hear you whisper somethin' that sounded like fraud, jest low? Ef I did, won't you say it ag'in, an' say it slow!"

CHAPTER III.

A FAIR GODDESS OF FORTUNE.

QUICK in her actions as thought itself, Dianthe sprung between the two men, a revolver clasped in each fair hand, her voice ringing out sharply:

"Peace, I bid you, gentlemen! This dispute can go no further, at least within these walls. If you must quarrel, go elsewhere. I do all the shooting this establishment requires."

"Appoint me your deputy, Miss Dianthe, and I'll undertake to keep these fellows in order!" cried a clear, eager voice, and a young man in rough miner's clothing sprung to her side, pistol in hand.

The gambler queen cast a swift glance into the face of the volunteer, seeming anything but pleased at the interference, for there was a sharp, unpleasant echo in her voice.

"When I desire your assistance, Mr. Avery, I will ask for it. Until then, be kind enough to not interfere."

The young man shrunk back as though that voice had been a blow in the face from a mailed hand. The generous flush which had dyed his cheek died away, and gave place to a look of mingled pride and despair.

Carl Sherwood's lip curled derisively as he noted this, for words could not have spoken plainer, and he seemed about to add his share to the rebuff, when Professor Quack broke out with:

"Quarrel, ma'am, did ye say? Me quarrel, an' with my best frind? Lord love ye, honey! reckon ye didn't jest ketch who I said I was, or you wouldn't think that! I'm the Old Boy, fresh come up from the 'fernal regions, to pick up new kinks o' devilry on the footstool, an' the red hot scent o' brimstone brung me here to Tombstone. It was kinder lonesome at fust, but sence my purty frind hes come, it ain't quite so homesicky as it was."

Despite herself the gambler queen was forced to smile, quite as much by the manner as the words of the man in black, but Carl Sherwood failed to appreciate the remarks, and his sneer was lost in a black scowl, as something very like a curse came from beneath his drooping mustaches of jet.

Like magic the stern manner of the fair gambler returned, and standing midway between the two men, with a pistol covering each breast, she spoke again:

"Gentlemen, you are both strangers to me, and so far as personal interest is concerned, you might murder each other every hour in the day, without causing me any particular uneasiness, provided you make a proper selection of the scene. But you can't pour out your gore in this ranch, while I'm running it. Give me your words of honor, as gentlemen, that you will keep the peace as long as you both remain beneath my roof, or, by the heavens above! I'll make sure of your compliance by winging you myself!"

No one who saw her face, her glittering eyes and firmly-compressed lips, who heard her hard, metallic tones, could for an instant doubt that

the gambler queen would make her vow good unless the men addressed should prove amenable to reason. In every fiber she "meant business."

Professor Quack bowed low, with a deprecating wave of his long, black hands. The eyes of Carl Sherwood filled with a glow of admiration which he made no effort to disguise.

"You have but to command, madam, and I obey."

"Ditto here, ma'am!" cheerfully echoed the Old Boy. "Not beca'se o' the bullets—oh, no! Es fer me, they'd melt to nothin' long afore they got wishin a foot o' my karkidge. Takes more'n cold lead to faze the devil, don't ye know, honey? An' talkin' o' Carly boy, yender, bless your two bright eyes an' giner'al purtiness all over, ma'am, you don't think I'd play it so low down-mean as to eyther hurt or let him git hurt, do ye? An' him doin' all he kin to add to the poppylation o' my empire—"

The self-styled Old Boy paused and glanced around him, with a reproving solemnity as a snicker broke from the crowd. Sherwood flushed hotly, and took a step toward the audacious fellow, but the hand of the gambler queen closed upon his shoulder, and her voice breathed in his ear:

"Control yourself, Mr. Sherwood. The poor fellow is hardly accountable for his words or actions," and yielding to the gentle impulse, Sherwood suffered Dianthe to lead him through the doorway by means of which the gambling hall was gained.

There, where her voice could be heard only by the man whom she addressed, Dianthe spoke hurriedly, seemingly unconscious of the fact that the young miner whom she had so coldly rebuffed but a few moments before, was watching them with glowing eyes and hard-drawn lips.

"It may be a foolish whim, but please promise me that you will let this affair go no further. It can bring no honor or credit to you, for it is plain enough that the poor fellow is cracked-brained, and little better than an idiot."

"More knave than fool, madam, I think you will find," said Sherwood, with a light laugh. "But, be it as you will. If he does not add to his insolence, I will not punish him as, I confess, I fully intended doing. He may thank you for his life."

"Thanks; though I still must differ with you on that one point. Surely no sane being would act as he has done ever since his first appearance in Tombstone."

"Then he is not an entire stranger to you, as I inferred from your speech a moment ago?" quickly, almost suspiciously.

"Save through town talk, yes. I have heard of his queer claims to be the devil, and queerer actions. That is all for the present. The crowd is coming back to the tables."

Turning away, the gambler queen encountered the sad, reproachful gaze of Will Avery. Her lips compressed themselves tightly, and a light flashed into her blue eyes as she brushed past him and stepped behind the bar.

For one moment his gaze followed her; then he turned away and drifted with the crowd as it flocked around the gaming tables with a zest all the greater for the brief interruption caused by the "circus."

His jaws hard set, an unusually reckless look upon his rugged but comely face, Will Avery took a seat in the front row at the faro-table, emptying his pockets before him, and placing his first bet, with a vicious emphasis, as he "coppered" the queen of hearts in the painted lay out.

That was his favorite card, perhaps from a vague and secret fancy that it faintly resembled the fair queen who had filled his mind and heart ever since their first meeting, more than a month ago. For, it may as well be stated here, poor Will Avery was over head and ears in love with Dianthe.

Homeless, parentless, a waif on the wild western sea, he had drifted to Tombstone without aim or definite purpose, not thinking of remaining there a week. But the first saloon he entered chanced to be that owned by Dianthe, and her face greeted his bewildered vision over the bar as she blandly inquired how she could serve him.

Before the soft echoes of her voice died away poor Will knew that he had met his fate, for good or evil. An amused smile playing around her rosy lips recalled him to his senses for the time being, though what the answer he made, or what the liquor she served him, he could not tell to save his life.

That week the first stamp-mill was opened for work, and Avery secured a position therein. As frequently as his duties would permit Will visited the Bower, and it was not his fault that Dianthe still lived in single blessedness, for within a week from their first meeting he had poured out the burning contents of his heart at her feet, begging her to abandon the life which was so ill-suited to one of her youth and beauty, and grant him the precious privilege of fighting life's battle for her.

At first she rebuffed him pretty decidedly. But Will was too deeply in earnest to take no

for an answer. Then she tried laughter and ridicule with no better effect, and then, one bright Sabbath afternoon, when Will waylaid her as she wandered out of town, Dianthe—well, without positively uttering the one word for which he begged so hungrily, she left the foolish fellow in the seventh heaven of delight, though brief indeed was his residence there. As though to make up for her momentary weakness, the gambler queen had snubbed the young miner most unmercifully ever since, at the same time avoiding him when he sought for an explanation.

Now, in despair, Will Avery took a gloomy satisfaction in changing his usual line of play, scowling at the painted queen of hearts as the imaginary representative of his fickle goddess, playing it to lose, instead of win.

Foolish? Granted; but the wisest of us will suffer occasional relapses, especially during a first love affair.

Will Avery did not realize the full extent of his folly, nor for a moment dream how transparent were his actions to more than one of those who had noticed him play faro before.

Then, each stake was placed upon the card of his choice with a tender care that was almost reverent. Always the queen—his queen of hearts, not simply a painted card. All the same to him whether he won or lost. It was not a desire for gain that led him to the table. The blood of a gambler did not flow in his veins. If fortune smiled upon him, he came oftener to his secret shrine and stayed longer, for he had from the first vowed that he would not keep one dollar that came from her bank. If he lost, he was only sorry in that it kept him away from the Bower until he could earn another stake.

But now, he slapped the gold spitefully upon the simpering face, accompanied by the blackest checker he could find, scowling gloomily, giving a defiant snort through his dilated nostrils.

An amused smile curled the well-waxed mustaches of the neatly dressed, gentlemanly-looking dealer as he noted the woeful change in the demeanor of the young miner, for poor Will's love story was an open secret to all who took any interest in either party, but this swiftly vanished as his eyes—which seemed to see nothing off the board before him, but which saw all that went on in that room—told him that Dianthe was slowly moving that way.

It was nothing unusual for the fair goddess of fortune to thus make the rounds, idly watching the varying phases of each game, and those who noticed her approach made no comment now, and wholly bent on taking his revenge on the fickle queen of hearts, Will Avery was still in ignorance of her presence.

One after another the cards were drawn from the silver box with mechanical regularity by the white, slender fingers of the dealer, who paused only to pay losses or rake in winnings. Then, when the last card was drawn forth, and the deal at an end, the dealer arose from his seat, in obedience to a swift signal from the white fingers of Dianthe, who as promptly stepped into the vacated place.

Will Avery turned white as a ghost as he saw this, and half-rose from his chair. Those blue eyes flashed up into his face, then were again veiled by the long, curving lashes as Dianthe deftly rippled the thin cards. Will dropped back into his chair as though that swift glance had given him a galvanic shock, trembling like a leaf. Only for a moment, though. The gloomy, tragic scowl returned as the clear voice of the gambler queen uttered the formula:

"Fortune awaits you, gentlemen; make your game!"

Poor, foolish Will had lost heavily from his winnings of the past night or two, and, when the change of dealers was made, only a few dollars remained of the pile before him. Stacking these and adding a copper, he planted the whole on the queen, for once eager to leave the presence of his faithless divinity, but resolved not to do so while there remained in his possession a coin which had once belonged to her.

Deftly those white, jeweled fingers manipulated the cards, only pausing to pay or take in stakes as they were lost or won. Then, for the first time that evening, the queen came out on the losing side, and the plump hand of the fair goddess of fortune promptly duplicated the pile of the young miner.

There was one, at least, among those surrounding the faro table, who noticed that swift glance, and put a meaning to it.

That was the man to whom Peter Papagon had given the name of Carl Sherwood.

A gambler by occupation, he had come to Tombstone on pure business, seduced by the tales told of Dianthe's Bower and its proprietress. He inwardly cursed himself for mixing in an affair which had brought him so prominently before the company, since his plans would have been better served by his keeping in the background until ready to play his cards; and, feeling that his nerves were too ruffled for cool work, he stood watching the game with apparent carelessness, but really with the closest attention, to satisfy himself whether all was dealt on the square.

Knowing the ropes most thoroughly, versed in all the cunning devices and appliances used by

gamblers in fleeing the lambs, he was about convinced that the game before him was conducted perfectly on the square, and was thinking of retiring for the evening, when the change of dealers was made, and he caught that lightning glance.

Absorbed by his own thoughts, Sherwood only saw a hot-headed youth playing after a "system" which he made no effort to disguise, but now, as he followed that glance, and noted its effect, he recognized the young man whom Dianthe had so coldly rebuffed in the bar-room.

The careless, sleepy look left his eyes, and he paid far closer attention to the game than at first. The suspicion which flashed across his mind as he caught that one look, found speedy confirmation as Will Avery won his first stake.

"Abal there's a double game being played, or I'm wide of the mark!" flashed across his mind. "Was it a slip on her part, or did she really mean to slip an extra card, to make that greenhorn win?"

Dropping into a chair which one of the players just then vacated, Carl Sherwood took a few pieces of silver from his pocket and began play. It was only as a screen, however, from behind which he could the more readily watch the fair goddess of fortune and learn whether or no his sudden suspicions would be confirmed.

Deftly though the act was performed, he could almost have sworn that Dianthe had slipped two cards at once from the box, thus causing the queen to lose instead of win, which last would have swept away Will Avery's last stake.

Avery never touched the increased stake save to slip the "copper" so that it covered both stacks of money. He was suffering tortures, but he would not draw out of the game as long as a dollar which had once been hers, belonged to him.

As is usual in small towns, particularly in mining camps, cue-cards and a case-keeper were dispensed with here, leaving the players with no safeguard against foul dealing other than their own memory and wits. On the other hand, where pistols and cold steel form the law, few dealers can be found who will take the chances of cheating in a game publicly dealt, since discovery would almost surely mean death.

Yet Sherwood firmly believed that Dianthe was running that risk, and he was determined to satisfy himself on that point, as a basis for further operations.

To even his keen and practiced eyes, the box appeared to be all fair, the slit from which the cards were drawn being barely of sufficient width to permit a single card to pass at a time, differing in that respect from a "brace" box. But he knew, too, that there were "combination" boxes made and used, which would deal either fair or unfair, just as the one who manipulated it should decide most beneficial.

Once more the queen came out loser, and a slight shade crept over the face of the apparently careless, but in reality, watchful gambler, for either it was in the regular course of the cards, or else the trick was so adroitly performed as to completely baffle his penetration.

Still Will Avery permitted his now fourfold stake to remain on the coppered queen, and there came a little buzz of interest from among the other players. His face was a familiar one at that table, but never before had he shown such reckless playing or wore such a desperate look.

"Better 'vide it up, boy, afore it all goes in a heap," whispered his nearest neighbor, only to be greeted with a savage scowl and the rude response:

"Keep your advice until I ask for it. I'm running that pile, not you!"

Acting on a sudden impulse, Sherwood produced a stack of gold and played the queen to win, but his fingers hardly left the money before the queen came up for the third time on the wrong side.

And once again his keen eyes failed to detect any signs of unfair dealing, though he felt convinced that such there must have been.

Dianthe counted out the amount won by Avery, and pushed it toward him. Their eyes met, but the stubborn look in his hardened rather than grew softer, and he pushed the full sum over to the rest, covering the queen entirely from sight.

"There's no bucking against fate," said Sherwood, with a low laugh, as he took out a bill of large denomination and placed it next the queen, adding: "I play the lady to lose."

"It is a long lane that has no turning," softly uttered Dianthe, pausing with the tip of one finger on the card which lay exposed in the box. "Luck cannot always run one way, but if the change comes too late for me, my loss will be your gain. All set?"

Card after card was drawn in slow succession, until the box was nearly empty. Then—*the queen lost!*

Sherwood bit his lips sharply beneath his drooping mustaches, fairly disappointed, even though he had won his stake.

He had placed the bet, believing that Avery was playing this bold game in the interests of the bank, as a "capper." If so, he mentally argued, and the dealing was not on the square.

his heavy stake would serve to break that wonderful run of luck. Dianthe would bring the queen out winner, to capture his money. And in thus losing, he would still count himself gainer in the knowledge won.

He was thoroughly puzzled as he sat moodily watching the few remaining cards drawn from the box.

"If she is dealing a brace game, her skill just lays 'way over anything I ever encountered," he mentally reflected, his glittering black eyes watching the gambler queen as she swiftly shuffled the thin, supple cards before returning them to the box. "One thing certain; that soft pilgrim is not a confederate. Rather a lover. She bluffed him mighty sharp, a bit ago, and it's stirred up his cussedness. The blind dog! Can't see that she's just emptying her weasel all over him! Is she, though? There has been such wonderful runs of luck, and this may be one of them. I'll find out, if the bank holds out long enough—sure! She can't fool me every time!"

Then aloud, as Dianthe calmly glanced around to see that all those desiring to bet had planted their stakes:

"Excuse me, madam, but may I ask what is your limit?"

"The last dollar in bank. You are not weakening?"

"Not at all. I only asked for information," smiled Carl, as he pushed back his stake with his winnings. "I never yet deserted a lady in distress, nor will I be less constant now that beauty smiles on me."

"A very pretty speech, but does it apply? From this side of the table, it seems as though you gentlemen were most unmercifully abusing that poor queen," with a light laugh.

"Not worse than she has abused others, who have trusted their all on her false smiles!" almost savagely muttered Will.

"Opinions differ. But this is not business. All set?"

Though the table was surrounded by nearly every man in the room, eagerly watching the game, where such high stakes were being lost and won, only Will Avery and Carl Sherwood were betting. The rest appeared to be frightened off.

Card after card was drawn from the box, only serving to whet the steadily growing curiosity of the spectators, for as yet none of the queens had made an appearance.

Then, a brilliant, almost fierce light sprung into the keen, black eyes of the professional as the first queen came out on the losing side. But the hot breath which hissed between his tightly clinched teeth was drowned by the excited exclamations which burst from the spectators.

Only an instant did his feelings master him, then he was cool and composed as he carelessly watched Dianthe as her jeweled fingers deftly counted out the heavy sums that one card had cost her.

The secret was no longer her own.

Sherwood was right in his surmises of irregular dealing;—foul, it could hardly be called, since it resulted in the bank losing, instead of gaining a fortune.

The faro-box was one of those known to the craft, as a "combination." Unless manipulated in a certain manner, the dealing was perfectly fair, but by pressing a cunningly concealed spring in one corner, just where the left fingers naturally rested, the slit was opened wide enough for two cards to be drawn forth at the same time. And this was exactly what the gambler queen had done now, very adroitly, but not sufficiently so to baffle those experienced eyes.

Dianthe pushed the piles of gold and bank-notes across the table, then said, in a cold, steady tone:

"The game is ended, gentlemen. The bank is broken, for to-night, but it will be open and ready for all comers on the morrow. I bid you all good-evening."

CHAPTER IV.

THE OLD BOY AT WORK.

PROFESSOR JORALEMON GILTEDGE QUACK gazed blandly after the twain, as Dianthe drew Carl Sherwood through the doorless opening which led into the apartment devoted to gambling, a gentle smile playing around his red lips and beaming forth from his blue eyes.

"Thar ye see it, gentlemen—the universal law o' natur'. Him an' me—sot the couple o' us up, side an' side, with each other in your mind's eye. Look at us cluss. Study our respective p'int's. Dwell on our contrastin' beauties, both mental and physical. Smell an' taste 'em like you would a new brand o' fine-cut, to git at the genuine flavor then chuck 'em into the onprejudiced scales o' justice, an' see which pile'd kick the empty ether highest. Would the Old Boy o' Tombstone go up in a balloon, or wouldn't he? Not any! He'd settle right down to hard-pan, every time!"

"That's the way a man would reason; but lovely woman—Lord love 'em, an' so do I, from spit-curls to French heels!—ain't that kind o' hairpin. With the poic, they say:

"The old man is gray,
The old man is gray;
The young man is full of life—
Go 'way, old man, go 'way!"

An' the frosty cabeza gits the door slammed in his face every time—bet your sweet life!"

A mournful look came into the rosy face, and the Old Boy heaved a doleful sigh as he turned toward Peter Papagon, who, in obedience to the last command of his master, had retreated to the corner of the bar-room and sat down, his eyes closed, but with every other feature stiff and rigid.

The long, black fingers twinkled for a moment before his face. The strained expression vanished, and to all appearance Peter fell into a sound and natural sleep, a long-drawn, musical snore coming through his blood-stained nostrils.

Feeling that the fun was over, the majority of the crowd returned to the gaming-tables; but the bar-room was not entirely deserted.

Very few, if any, other mines in this country are so easily worked as those of Tombstone. The natural formation is a mixture of limestone, quartzite, and porphyry, with slight indications of granite. The character of these is simple and easy of reduction, chlorides predominating; and the ore lies so near the surface that but a comparatively small number of miners are employed. Herein lies the secret of so many men out of employment—miners flocking thither, attracted by the prestige of the place, to find that one man could do what would employ five or six in some sections of the country.

As a natural consequence, Tombstone was more than usually well supplied with out-at-the-elbows and empty-pocket citizens; bummers, rogues and honest men; a few who would rather starve than work, but many who were starving because there was absolutely no work for their willing hands to do. Without friends or money, unable to obtain work at any price, yet still less able to leave that ominously-named place for a more favorable locality, they hung around the saloons and gaming-houses, waiting for something to turn up, for some lucky gambler to give them a stake—anything to pass away the time.

Thus it was that not all the occupants of Dianthe's Bower sought the gaming-tables, and that Professor Quack still had an audience, respectable in size, if in nothing else.

"Thar, gentlemen, you hev afore ye a most reemarkable 'lustration o' the power o' mind over matter," with a gentle wave of his hand toward the slumbering giant. "Big enough to knock me west-end-an'-crooked fer makin' a pinny poppy-show o' him, is Popgun Peter. But he don't do it. 'Case why? My brain is bigger'n his karkidge, my will-power stronger'n his heaps o' muskle. What I tells him to do, that he's boun' to 'complish, whether he kin or not."

"Look at him now—soun' asleep an' snorin' away wuss then any big Dutchman playin' on a bassoon; yit ef I was to whisper: 'You Peter, thar's a he-old flea a-chawin' at your left year; scratch it off with your right-hand hoof; bet your sweet life he'd do it, or bu'st a leg a-tryin'!"

Even as he spoke, the ridiculous feat was performed by the unconscious slave of his will, amid the loud laughter of the spectators, though some of these edged a little further away from the professor, as though beginning to believe he was really the diabolical personage he claimed to be.

"Bless ye, gents, thar's not the least 'casion fer ye to git skeered," with a bland smile. "In all my travels, I don't know when I ever run across a crowd, take it all in all, as nigh perfect as the one which I now have the honor o' 'dressin'. Not a white ram, sheep nor goat in the hull caboodle! Keep on a-sarvin' the master as faithful as ye've begun, an' he won't call ye home afore you're clean ripe—getherin' fuel is a heap more 'portant then punchin' fires."

His audience interchanged dubious glances. They were not quite sure that they fully understood his meaning. Surely he could not be making game of them!

Smiling genially, the Old Boy of Tombstone took a white handkerchief from his breast-pocket, shaking out the folds as he sipped a little water from a glass standing on the bar, then drew the cloth lightly across his lips.

Instantly the fabric burst into flames. The Old Boy uttered a little cry as he dropped the handkerchief, which was almost entirely consumed ere he touched the floor, and there was an apologetic smile on his lips as he glanced around over the astounded assembly.

"The best of us will make mistakes, sometimes, gents, an' this was my turn. Al'ays sarves me that way, does cold water. An' ef, by any on-lucky chance, I was to swallow a little chunk o' ice, thar'd be a wuss 'splosion an' 'ruption then ever old 'Suvius or Etna throwed up on a holiday! Sad, but a most onmarciful fact! Which is the reason that I al'ays stick to straight whisky as a beaveridge; an' that 'minds me;—sling 'em out, Johnny, an' p'izen the gents!"

There were no lingering doubts now in the

minds of his auditors, and it was pitiful to see how unanimously they pressed up to the bar and reached for the bottle.

The Old Boy drank with the rest, but he left his glass of water untouched until all had swallowed their liquor. Then he produced a double eagle, and spinning it in the air, it fell into the glass of water. Instantly there was a hissing sound, and the water began to bubble, sending up a spiral of steam.

Even faster than they had advanced, did the bummers retreat, while the barkeeper stared first at the Old Boy, then at the bubbling water, out of which the yellow coin gleamed like the eye of a demon.

"Didn't want to scorch them lily white fingers o' yours, that's all, Johnny," smiled the Old Boy, fishing out the coin and ringing it on the bar. "Gimme the change, quick, fer I'm in a hurry to go in thar an' grapple with the tiger afore it loses all its wool."

"I won't hold you back, be sure of that," retorted the barkeeper, a little sourly. "You've played enough of your fool tricks in here. Don't be in a hurry about coming back."

"All right; but, look here, old man, this ain't the cheese," and Professor Quack held out his hand into which he had gathered the change which the other hastily pushed toward him. "All coppers, every durned one! I a'n't a bog, nur yit I don't grumble at little things, but a critter must draw a line somewhar, or get everlastin'ly left."

"I gave you the right change. Don't try to play any of your infernal tricks or you will get left, bad!"

"But yer kin see fer yourself, an' so kin these gents."

"So can you;—shut up or pull out!" and as he spoke, the barkeeper jerked a cocked revolver from beneath the counter, covering the Old Boy like a flash.

"All right, Johnny; I won't say another word but this: Mistakes go at this bank, does they? No matter which way they turn up?"

"Mistakes go, and so will you, in a heap hurry, if you try to play roots on yours truly; please bear that in mind, old gent!" with an emphatic nod.

"Mistakes go she am, an' I'm jest so much ahead o' the game!" chuckled the Old Boy, tossing the despised coins into the air with his right hand, they forming a gentle curve and falling into his left, to be tossed back again in the same order, but with this startling difference; each one was now a glittering golden coin, double eagles all! "Hope ye won't hev too much trouble in settlin' your cash a'count t is evenin', Johnny. I'd squar' it all up, but you would hev it that all goes as she lays!"

The barkeeper turned away with a hot, angry flush as the crowd laughed. He was no fool, and knew that it would only make matters worse to give vent to his anger.

"That was done mighty slick, old gent," said one of the party, short, fat, ill-savored and rusty looking, with a cunning leer in his bleared, blood-shot eyes. "Done it myself, lots o' times, afore sorer an' grief or staided my han's. But the boys wasn't lookin', an' you didn't ketch 'em fair. Bet ye can't throw dust in thar eyes when they're on the lookout. Bet ye can't change a quarter into a saw-buck without our seein' jest the way you do it."

"Lend me a quarter to try with."

His fellows laughed, for the ragged bumbar was notoriously the most impecunious beggar in Tombstone, but a surprise awaited them on this occasion, for with a lofty air, he dove deep down into a pocket, and produced the coin named.

"Durned ef I don't do it. I ain't proud, ef I be rich. The boys shain't starve fer fun ef I kin help give it to 'em. Thar you be, old gent," and he spun the coin into the black-gloved hand. "It's got my private mark onto it—J. G., fer Jay Gould—what's the matter?"

The Old Boy caught the coin which would otherwise have passed over his head, and without lowering the member, stared at the coin with wide-opened eyes.

"You said a quarter of a dollar—this is a gold eagle instead!" and he held the money where all could see it.

Not the least amazed was the bumbar, though he immediately made the most of it.

"Durned ef I didn't go down into the wrong shaft, an' strike gold instead o' silver! Must 'a been cobwebs in that last p'izen I wropped myself outside of. Thanky, boss!" as the Old Boy tossed the coin back. "See ye some other time when I hain't got so long to spar!" and thrusting his tightly clinched fist deep down into his pocket, he was shuffling toward the door as though anticipating pursuit, when the clear, mocking tones of the professor halted him.

"You're dead sure that bit o' mineral was the same as you chucked to me? Sure thar wasn't no trick?"

"Course I'm sure!" with an uneasy chuckle. "Leave it to the crowd. Didn't you all see him ketch it?"

The general response satisfied even his eagerness. The crowd, believing the Old Boy out-generaled, were hugely enjoying the joke. But the professor smiled placidly as he said:

"And you saw me throw back the very same coin?"

"Sartin' sure! You ain't tryin' to go back on it now?"

"I'm satisfied if you are; what now?"

A yell of pain and terror broke from the bummer's lips as he withdrew his hand and shook it violently in the air, the mysterious coin falling to the floor, the crowd hastily scattering as it rolled toward them, leaving behind it a tiny trail of blue smoke amid the sawdust.

"Durn the thing!" howled the bummer, blowing and spitting on his fingers, then squeezing them under his armpit as he hopped up and down. "It's red-hot—fresh from Hades! Ef you ain't the devil hisself, you're mighty close kin!"

"Pore critter!" sighed the Old Boy, rolling up his blue eyes and shaking his head mournfully. "He's got 'em right bad. Take warnin', gents an' feller-citizens. Look not on the wine when it is red, fer it biteth wuss then a tappin' snurkle an' stingeth sharper then a Jersey 'skeeter!"

Amid all his howling, the bummer kept one eye on the coin, and as one of his fellows tried slyly to draw it toward him with a toe, he uttered a cry of warning and leaped forward, only to start back with a howl of angry disappointment.

"I'm robbed—that ain't my money! Somebody's tuck it up an' putt a durned old copper cent in its place! It's another durn trick o' yours, ye tarnal imp!" and he shook a dirty fist at the bland professor. "Gimme my ten dollars, or I'll be the everlastin' death o' ye!"

The uplifted hand was caught and held as though in a vise, while those blue eyes stared fixedly into his inflamed orbs. A black finger twinkled before his face, into which came a sudden look of terror.

"It's all a trick, that anybody kin see," said the Old Boy, sharply, "but it ain't my doin', nur yit that of any other human critter save your own self, helped on by bad whisky. You thought you throwed me a quarter; thought I throwed you back gold; thought it burnt your fingers—but it was all whisky. You've got the trembles—got 'em bad. Thar's snakes in your boots, now! See thar!" and swiftly stooping, he rose with a hissing, writhing snake in each hand, drawn apparently from the ragged boots of the bewildered bummer.

A wild yell of horror broke from the poor devil's throat as he broke away and rushed out at the door.

CHAPTER V.

THE OLD BOY LOCKS HORNS WITH SHERWOOD.

"Ef that crazy critter hes got any fri'nd here as takes any intrust in his welfar' now's the time to show it," calmly uttered the Old Boy, as he dropped the snakes and crushed their heads with his heel. "Foller him. Git him to go to bed an' take a good sleep, an' he'll be all right in the mornin'. Johnny, set 'em up fer the boys, an' take your pay out o' that. 'Twon't burn your fingers ef you're keerful," he added, with a low, mocking laugh, as the barkeeper suspiciously eyed the golden coin which the speaker flung on the counter.

Without waiting for a reply the strange being turned away and entered the other room, where the interest of all was centered on the table where Will Avery was playing such a desperate game, winning a fortune even while trying to lose.

Not one of the close-ranked crowd noticed the new-comer as he silently drew near enough to note the progress of the little drama. In silence he stood, his keen eyes drinking in every detail, the only one present to whom the sly watch which Carl Sherwood kept on the nimble fingers of the gambler queen was perceptible or comprehended.

As Dianthe announced the temporary suspension of the bank, and then swept gracefully from the room, the spell which had fallen upon and held the spectators speechless was broken, and the long pent-up emotions found relief in an eager buzz of conversation.

Will Avery looked almost miserable as he sat still and stared at the heap of gold and bank-notes on the fated queen of hearts. He was no gambler—or if so, was a gambler through love for Dianthe, not a lust for gain—and on that night in particular he would far rather have lost than won.

He had vowed to visit the Bower no more after that night. The repeated rebuffs which he had received from Dianthe could only mean one thing—she loved him no longer, even if that love had ever existed. He had wearied her long enough. He would trouble her no longer. He would go away and show no sign of his heart-wounds. That triumph, at least, he could deprive his cruel tormentor of—and it was his sole consolation.

But now—this money was hers. But how to restore it? He had made her proud nature a study, and believed that he understood it perfectly. To refuse the money and leave it as it lay would not benefit her in the least. She would not touch it he knew. Nor could he

force it upon her only in the one way—he must play it in over the table.

A number of eager friends gathered around, congratulating him upon his marvelous run of luck—for such each and every man, save one, around the table believed it to be—but he gave them little heed. He gathered up the money and stowed it away about his person, then drew his revolvers and deliberately examined the cartridges, trying the locks and whirling round the cylinders.

His actions spoke louder than words, and those who saw him knew that any person trying to follow and rob him would find their work ready cut out for them.

A short, heavy-set man of middle age pushed up close to where Carl Sherwood was sitting counting over his gains, and bending, whispered a few hurried words into his ears. A gleam came into the gambler's eye, as he glanced covertly toward Will Avery, and bending forward, he said:

"Thanks to the lead you set me, friend, I captured a little of the plunder. I hardly had a right to act as I did, and I beg your pardon for so doing."

Hardly comprehending his meaning, Will stared at the speaker. With a pleasant smile, Sherwood added:

"I wish to make what amends lies in my power, and if you are not cloyed with good fortune, I shall be only too happy to give you a chance at short cards—say poker."

Avery cut him short with a cold bow and still colder:

"Thanks. I never play cards with strangers."

A hot flush mounted clear to the temples of the gambler, and his black eyes glittered wickedly as Avery turned away from the table. But ere the words which trembled on the tip of his tongue could find utterance, a bland voice enunciated:

"Ef you're sp'ilin' fer a good old game o' draw, stranger, I'm your huckleberry!"

Wheeling swiftly, Sherwood beheld Professor Joralemon Giltedge Quack, with his everlasting smile, bowing lowly.

"You, is it?" he uttered sharply.

"Jest me, individooally an' collectively; Professor Joralemon Giltedge Quack, or the bloom-in' O d Boy o' Tombstone, jest whichever your cultivated taste may prefer—yes, sir!"

"Look here," said Sherwood, his voice hard and cold, an ugly light filling his eyes, as one white finger was raised to lend emphasis to his speech. "You may be the old man those white hairs represent, or you may be the young man in disguise which your fresh-looking face and active figure renders far more probable. But whichever you be—and I don't care a curse—you have bothered me enough for one night. I bore with you out yonder because a lady interfered to protect you, but she is not here now; understand?"

The Old Boy shrugged his shoulders, with a deprecating wave of his gloved hands.

"I cain't say that I jestly do. You tumbled into my little advertisin' sarcus, out yender, without my invitation or askin'. Ef you got a tech o' the lash which was 'tended fer the clown, be I to blame fer that? I stood ready to pay the damages, ef you could collect 'em, an' I'm still open fer all perposals o' that sort. Beg your pardon, stranger, but I ain't a beggar axin' fer alms, so jest keep your han's out o' your pockets, ef you please!"

Swifter even than were his words, came the actions of the strange man. At the bold defiance, quaintly expressed though it was, the hand of Carl Sherwood made a lightning move for his revolver, but ere his nimble fingers could do more than close upon the polished butt of the weapon, the Old Boy of Tombstone had the drop, smiling blandly over the barrel of a cocked revolver as he uttered his warning.

The crowd instantly scattered, and the heavy-set man of whom brief mention has been made, dodged behind the Old Boy, whipping forth a revolver, but before he could use it, a long leg shot out backward and taking him in the pit of the stomach with all the force of a catapult, hurled him across the room, against the further wall, at the base of which he fell in a gasping, quivering heap, most effectually disposed of, for the time being, at least.

That leg belonged to the anatomy of the Old Boy, and the kick which it delivered would have done honor to a government mule on double rations of corn and oats.

Yet not a single glance did that worthy cast behind him, nor did he give Carl Sherwood the slightest opportunity to draw a weapon, while he smiled more blandly than ever.

"Set 'em up on the other alley, Johnny, when the p'izen critter gits back wind enough to blow the cramps out o' his stumblejacket an' fresh starch his backbone!"

The gambler was no fool. He saw plainly enough that for once he was overmatched, and though it was a bitter bill for a man of his proud nature to swallow, he made the best of it.

"What the devil are you trying to get through you, anyhow?" he demanded, with an admirably assumed air of amazement.

"Jest tryin' to keep you from sinkin' a lead

shaft through my system ag'inst the grain, an' your pard from makin' a button-hole in my dress coat whar I hain't the least use in the world fer any sech, that's all. Sorry to spile your fun, but I hed to do it, don't you see?"

"No, I don't see!" snapped Sherwood. "But this much I am thoroughly co vinced of:—if not a madman, you come the nearest to being a natural-born fool of any human being I ever had the misfortune to run across! I hadn't the slightest intention of shooting you, for it is no mission of mine to cheat the hangman out of his just dues. And as for that poor fellow over yonder, whom you have probably crippled for life, he is a total stranger to me."

"Yit he whispered in your ear jest a bit ago, to tackle young Will Avery, an' skin him out o' his stake."

A bitter laugh parted the gambler's lips, and cut short the sarcastic speech of the professor.

"You hold me covered, while my hands are empty. If we stood on equal terms, I would say that your last assertion is a lie, without the slightest foundation in fact. As it is, I leave it to your imagination until I can repeat it."

A low laugh ran through the crowd, and even the professor grinned at the adroit manner in which his adversary rounded the dangerous point. Still his weapon kept the gambler covered, and he did not throw away a chance.

"You kin count that in when we come to the final settlement, fer that will turn up in the course o' events, as I hain't feelin' no partic'lar scruples ag'inst savin' the hangman a job, ef you hev. But this talk ain't business. We both promised the lady that we wouldn't nuther o' us pull trigger or burn powder inside o' her place o' business, didn't we?"

"Yes, and you are keeping that pledge most admirably!" retorted Sherwood, with a hard laugh.

"Ain't I?"—innocently. "Ain't you settin' thar, comf'table as a broodin' rooster? Ain't your bellers in good workin' condish? Would them be sich ef I used the tools? Echo answers not a durn bit of it! You'd be yellin' out fer a wooden overcoat an' a funeral sarmon. You would, fer a fact!"

"Come! Enough of this nonsense!"—impatiently. "Go your way and I'll go mine. We're both bound by a pledge which we cannot break as long as we remain beneath this roof. If you are responsible for your words, step outside, and I'll not keep you waiting long."

"One thing at a time, an' they'll last longer," retorted the Old Boy, with provoking coolness, unheeding the mutter of applause with which the volatile crowd greeted the bold speech of his adversary. "My challenge comes fust. I bantered you to a game o' draw, though you're a perfeshional, while I don't hardly know one keerd from another, or whether one pa'r beats fo' aces, or contrairywise."

"When I play, it is for stakes worth the trouble."

The black fingers went into their owner's breast-pocket, extracting a well-filled wallet. Dexterously the one hand opened the book, and took therefrom a pile of bills, the large denominations of which were exhibited by a skillful flutter.

"You think I'm a five-cent-ante feller—is that it?" grinned the Old Boy of Tombstone, as money and book again disappeared. "You kin see that I'm well heeled, an' to remove all further doubts, let me whisper in your ear jest this: You mebbe kin lay way over me when it comes to playin' the pasteboards, but you ain't got enough o' either money or sand to outbet me when it comes down to squar', honest bettin'!"

"You won't squeal or play the baby act, when you lose?"

"Scuse me fer minnit!" hurriedly dropped the Old Boy, as he leaped swiftly to one side, then wheeled, and with one panther-like bound alighted almost at the side of the man whose internal economy had been so seriously discomposed by that patent, back-action foot salute.

Out shot one of the black-gaitered feet and seemed to twine around the half-raised wrist of the fellow. A quick twist, and the benumbed fingers released the cocked derringer, which flew upward until it struck the ceiling with such force that the shock caused it to explode, sending its heavy bullet with a sullen thud down into the table against which Carl Sherwood still leaned. Not just then, but afterward, a rather curious fact was noted. That bullet fairly blotted out the painted face of the queen of hearts.

No sooner had his nimble foot performed the feat recorded than the Old Boy of Tombstone brought his no less active hand into play, and the black muzzle of a revolver stared the cowering wretch full in the face.

"Look here, stranger, you're too durned keerless with your lead-slingers. Fust thing you know, you'll hurt somebody, an' then you'll be sorry enough. That makes twice you thought ye would when you didn't, an' mebbe the third time'll be jest once too much. Now, you want to take your solemn davy that ye won't either tetch knife or pull trigger to-night, or off goes the hull top o' your cabeza, jest to let these gents

see ef you're as big a idjit as your looks an' doin's make out."

"Shoot and be cursed!" snarled the fallen man, his bloodshot eyes glowing like those of some ferocious wild beast.

"Hold!" cried Sherwood, leaping from his chair, earnest, but empty-handed. "I'll give you the pledge for him, and see that it is faithfully kept, on peril of my own life!"

The Old Boy of Tombstone laughed softly, as he lowered his weapon, though he still kept a finger on the trigger.

"So ye do know the p'izen critter? I thought ye was mistaken, a bit back, when you said he was a perfect stranger to ye. But, that's all right; I don't want to kill the kant'kerous cuss, fer I 'magine I kin see a better use fer him in the dim futur', but I'll hev to do it, unless you or some other o' his mates bottles him up fer keeps. This keepin' a lookout at both ends as well as in the middle may be chuck full o' fun to them what's lookin' on, but it's drefful wearin' on the nerves an' shoe-leather o' yours truly, which is me!"

Carl Sherwood approached and knelt at the side of the man, who was still far from having recovered from that lightning kick in the stomach. Bending his head, the gambler whispered a few sentences in the ear of his friend, so guarded that not a sound could be heard by any other.

"It's all right now. He'll make no more trouble to-night. I'll answer for him with my own life," announced Sherwood, rising.

"Which goes to show that they is a sensible streak left in his cabeza, though a body'd hardly think it, from the keerless way which he's bin sloshin' hisself around," grinned Professor Quack, as his pistol disappeared somewhere about his person, it would have puzzled any one but himself to say just where or how.

"Enough talk!" impatiently interrupted Sherwood. "Let's get down to business, if you have the sand to back your words of a bit ago."

"Which an' whar? In here or out thar?"

"I'll empty your pockets first, just to save you the trouble of making a will," laughed the gambler, with a grim earnestness underlying the scoffing words. "After that I'll convince these gentlemen that your nimble tongue is the bravest portion of your make-up, or I'll measure you for a coffin just as quick as we can both get outside of these walls. Are those words plain enough for your understanding?"

"Ef I hed my eyes shet I'd think it was me that was doin' the talkin', you bit my sentiments so plum in the center," and the Old Boy of Tombstone nodded approvingly, as he slowly drew off his close-fitting gloves, revealing hands as white and fair as those of a lady.

"You Johnny-behind-the-bar! trot out a fresh pack o' your very top-uptest keards. The two he-old pokers o' the roarin' West is goin' to lock horns fer ducats tell ye can't rest! Will one o' you gents pay fer the keards, fetch 'em here, an' keep the change fer your trouble?"

As he spoke, Professor Quack spun a gold coin high in the air, a score of hands snatching wildly at it, the lucky man hastening to perform his errand.

Carl Sherwood received the pack, looked close at the unbroken stamp, then made his way to a round table near the rear of the room, followed by his smiling antagonist.

The eager crowd flocked around, feeling that this was to prove no ordinary game, but the brows of the gambler contracted darkly as he keenly scanned their interested faces, then placed a cocked revolver on the table at his right hand.

"Gentlemen, I'm a stranger here among strangers. I don't want to give any offense, but I've just one word to say before this game opens. I'm playing cards with this man, and him alone. If he can, beat me fair and square, I'll never kick. But if any one else chip in, I'll call him with this," tapping the ivory butt of the exhibited weapon.

"Which I'd like to remark that them's my sentiments to a dot!" chimed in the Old Boy, impressively. When I'm playin' keards, I'm the peskiest, onnerviest critter you kin scratch out o' seventeen counties. An' when I git that way I kin out-kick a goverment mule on double rations! A word to the wise is 'ficient, says the poic an' two on 'em ought to be a heap plenty fer this crowd."

Sherwood tore the cover from the deck and closely examined the backs. Professor Quack smiled more blandly than ever as he noticed this evidence of distrust.

"Lord love ye, mate! the spots is on the other side. I thought you was a old han' at the biz, but even I know more'n that," he said, with an air of triumph.

"You're a smart fellow, no doubt—so smart that I'm taking no chances with you, this bout," quietly retorted the gambler. "But the cards are not marked, and in that I wronged you. All the same, let me give you this warning:—If I catch you trying any of your sleight-of-hand performances in this little game I'll blow your brains out without any further warning. Is that plain enough?"

"You ain't hintin' at cheatin', an' me a green-horn buckin' ag'inst a professor!" echoed the Old Boy, amazed.

"Call it a hint, if you like the term better. One word more: is it to be straight game or jack-pot? Only the regular hands, or with straight flushes counted in?"

"Straight game an' reg'lar counts. Them pesky straights make a sure thing mighty onsure, an' give jest one more temptation fer a slick player to set up the keards—an' that's whar you'd hev me at a big disadvantage."

"Just as you say. What shall be the ante?"

"You're in a hurry to size my pile, an' I b'lieve in punchin' things up lively from the word git-up, so that wou't make much differ. Suit yourself, an' I won't squeal."

Sherwood passed the cards and the Old Boy cut. The gambler won the deal, and tossed a double eagle on the table.

"Twenty dollars ante, then; no limit to the betting, but the man with the smallest pile to have a sight for his cash."

For a few minutes there was perfect silence, save for the faint rustling of the cards and the low chink of money.

It was clear to those who were watching the game that the two antagonists were carefully feeling of each other, in gaming parlance; that this was but the preliminary skirmish before the battle opened in sober earnest.

They could see, too, that despite his protest, the Old Boy was far from being a novice with the cards or at the game, while Carl Sherwood played with the cold, icy composure, and skill of a veteran professional.

But little betting was done on the first few hands, but quite enough for the cards shown by the winner, which was now Sherwood, now the Old Boy of Tombstone. Yet all present felt that the tug of war would come in time, and breathlessly watched the progress of the game.

Nor were they kept long in suspense. Sherwood dealt the cards. Professor Quack called for three cards, and the gambler served himself with the same number. A brief inspection of the cards, then the Old Boy opened the fat wallet which lay before him, and extracted a bank-note bearing in the corner, a letter D.

"That's what the fust look says, anyhow," he said, with a smile, as the bill floated down on the pieces of gold in the center of the table.

Not a muscle of Sherwood's face altered as he laid his cards face down while he counted out the amount and covered the bet. He was a model poker player, who never wasted words, knowing that cards and money talk even plainer. And still in silence, he spread out three bank-notes of the same denomination as that wagered by his adversary.

"Waal I ber-durned!" ejaculated that worthy his blue eyes opening widely. "You raise it fifteen hundred?"

"The money talks. Put up or back down," gruffly said Sherwood, casting a glance through his thick eyebrows into the face of the other, as though trying to read the innermost workings of his mind.

"All right; never takes a dare,—that's my motto, from the word jump!" declared the Old Boy, his nimble left hand at work. "I'm goin' to see what you're bettin' on, ef it takes the last stitch out o' my pocket. Thar's your fifteen, an' thar's one, two, three, four, five thousan' better!"

Cool as ever, Carl Sherwood went down into his pockets once more, and covered the amount wagered. Then, with a keen glance toward the wallet of his adversary, he said:

"Since we've gone so far, we might as well end it right on this hand. How much have you left in your pile?"

"More'n enough to kiver all you kin putt up."

"I only asked to save time in drawing down the surplus, in case my pile out-sized yours. I've got three thousand left and there it is," suiting the action to the word.

"Ef I knowed you was so nigh broke, I wouldn't 'a' tackled you at all, fer of all things I do deespise little, pickavune games!" sniffed the Old Boy. "Thar!—What you got?"

Sherwood faced his cards; four tens and a face card.

"Waal I ber-durned! Fo' tens, an' I think you was bluffin' all the time! An' me only got two pa'r—aces—and—"

"Show down, or g'ye up the pot!" sharply.

Slowly the Old Boy obeyed. Two aces, then a small spot-card. A pause. Another ace. The gambler's face turned white as death, but his teeth grated together. A fourth ace! and a gasping gurgling cry of horror broke from Sherwood's lips.

In the center of that ace was a round bullet-hole!

CHAPTER IV.

THE GAMBLER PARDS.

LIKE one whose blood is slowly turning to ice in his veins, Carl Sherwood stared at the last ace as it fell on top of the other three. That one hoarse cry, then he was silent, but with a convulsive shivering which kept every fiber in motion. His eyes were widely protruding. His flesh was the hue of a corpse. His long finger-nails cut into the flesh of his palms until the red blood trickled down and stained the table-top.

A short, mocking laugh broke from the smile-

ing lips of the Old Boy of Tombstone, as his long fingers hovered over the pile of gold and bank-notes.

"Fo' tens is a good han' to back in 'most any crowd, but they can't shine ag'inst aces and—'ticklarly when that and is a kipple more o' the same sort—not any! Reckon I want to corral that pot, fer keeps!"

But the old gentleman did not, just then, for a fresh element entered into the game, without a single warning.

A brace of revolvers shot out over the shoulders of the seemingly paralyzed gambler, and a hoarse voice uttered:

"Slow an' easy, old gent! Play we don't, fer a little!"

The start of surprise with which Professor Quack received this warning, was undoubtedly genuine, and his rosy face turned just a thought paler, while his blue eyes gleamed and glittered like those of an angry serpent as he recognized the man who spoke—none other than he whom he had twice defeated in attempts on his life, that very evening; the short, thick-set fellow for whose future good behavior, Carl Sherwood had gone bail.

"What do you mean?" he demanded, sharply.

"Keep them claws o' yourn in sight, an' don't you try to collar a weepin', less you want a ticket through to blazes, whar ye come from!" grated the fellow, his voice stern and deadly. "You can't sling them durned old hoofs o' yourn to do any good this time! You turned up jack twice, but it's dad's deal now, an' don't you let it slip your forgetfulness, nyther!"

At the first sign of trouble, the eager crowd had scattered, according to custom, none of them caring to serve as back-stops for stray bullets, and a single swift glance about showed the Old Boy from Tombstone that no outside help was to be expected. His jaws closed grimly, and the ugly light in his eyes grew more intense, but his voice was soft as silk when he spoke next.

"An' dad's tryin' to deal from the bottom, ain't he?"

"Top or bottom, it don't signify a durn mite," doggedly. "Mebbe you win that pot, an' mebbe you don't, but you've got to wait ontel my pard, here, gives in beat. Thar ain't goin' to be no durned hoodoo business 'bout it, long's I kin chip in!"

Another short, mocking laugh from those red lips.

"Is that all? Really, my dear critter, I thought you was goin' to blow my brains out fer tangling you up in a bow-knot a bit ago—though it was my hoof ag'inst your 'volver."

"I'll do that yet; but it'll be in the open, not from kiver of a mate, as now. It's his rights I'm pertectin' jest now. One o' his old spells hes gripped him, an' he ain't countable fer what he does an' says when onder the 'fluence o' them. So I say, hold your han' ontel he kin speak out fer himself, an' then I'll throw up my han' fer this deal."

"Thar's more of the man in your make-up then I hed any idee, from your cavortin's this evenin'," with an approving nod and smile. "You kin put up them barkers. I promise I won't tetch a weepin' or a dollar o' that pot, ontel your mate says that it's won fa'r an' squar."

"Mebbe so, but I don't trust ye," sullenly.

Puzzled, wondering what it all meant, how it would terminate, the crowd watched and waited. They could see the mutilated ace lying on the top of the other cards. They could see that it was the ace of diamonds, though a bullet had been sent so truly through its center, that now only the four points of the pip remained to tell this much, while even they were nearly obliterated by dark, brownish stains.

What grim suggestions that card gave rise to! What wild tales of tragic interest it might tell, were it only possessed of the power of speech! That bullet-hole—those dark stains which surrounded it like a grim areola—in what had it found birth? Was it blood? And was that blood human gore?

The Old Boy of Tombstone stared fixedly into the ashen-pale face of the stricken gambler, and that intense gaze seemed to bring back life and power of speech, for a low moan escaped the pallid lips, and Carl Sherwood made a feeble effort to rise to his feet.

"Wait a bit, Carl Sherwood, ef you please," softly purred the silken voice of his strange antagonist, and as the long, white fingers fluttered swiftly above the pile of money, they caught and seemed to hold the bewildered gaze of the gambler, much as a rattlesnake charms the foolish bird. "Your bull-headed mate ahind your cheer, 'pears to think that thar's jest a chance fer you to gobble this leetle pot, stead o' me!"

"Brace up, man! You ain't a baby!" hissed the short fellow in his ear. "Thar's some durned hoodoo business goin' on here. That keerd with a hole into it, didn't come out in a squar' deal, an' you're a monstrous fool ef you let that p'izen critter gouge ye out o' yer wealth. It's me that's talkin'!"

Thus spurred, the gambler made an effort to throw off the frightful spell which had fallen upon him. The air rattled huskily in his dry

throat, as he inhaled a long breath, and he tried to moisten his parched lips with his tongue.

Bending over the table, his blue eyes glittering like balls of polished steel reflecting the sunlight, his voice clear and icy cold, the Old Boy of Tombstone spoke:

"You hear what your mate says, Carl Sherwood?—that thar hes bin foul play o' some sort in this little game. Tell him he lies, an' save me the trouble."

"No; no foul play—it *is* fate!" muttered the gambler.

"You opened the pack; you dealt the last han'. You ain't a fool to let a man slip a cold han' onto ye when thar's so big a pile o' stamps at stake. Look!" and, as he spoke, the man in black swiftly turned the cards over, face down, spreading out the two hands so all could see. "The backs is the same figger—all but that bullet-hole. How that come in it, you kin tell better than I. Will you do it?"

A convulsive shudder shook the gambler from top to toe, and his eyes closed as he shrunk away and averted his head.

The man in black laughed, short, maliciously. "You won't? Waal, I ain't goin' to crowd ye no fuder *this* trip. Jest one more word, then I'm done. Who rakes in this pot?—you or me? An' was it fa'r won?"

"You—yes! Take me away, Abbles! I'm choking!—fresh air—ah-h—"

Swiftly replacing his revolvers, Abbles caught the form of the gambler as it collapsed, raising it in his powerful arms and moving toward the bar, as the interested and wondering crowd made way, but showing his teeth in a savage snarl, as he cast a look of ferocious hatred upon the man in black.

"You kin go fer now, you p'izen cuss. But look out! Dan Abbles ain't through with you yet—mind *that*!"

"When you call, I'll be to hum, purty boy. Ring the bell, an' wipe your hoofs on the doormat afore enterin'. So long," blandly retorted the Old Boy of Tombstone, as he bowed low and mockingly, then deftly gathered up his winnings and as swiftly left the room.

Some of the crowd followed, eager to see the end of this puzzling drama, while others, with a morbid curiosity, flocked about the table and sought for the bullet-marked card; but in vain. It had vanished with the man in black.

Dan Abbles supported his mate to the bar, calling for a glass of brandy. With gentle force he parted the tightly clinched teeth, and poured the fiery liquor down the stricken gambler's throat.

Its effect was not all he desired, though it served to partially arouse Sherwood, who faintly repeated his request.

"Help me out; take me home, old pard!"

"Soak his feet in hot water—give him a dose o' boneset tea—put him in bed an' kiver him up tight—an' he'll be right as a trivet in the mornin'."

With a savage snarl Dan Abbles turned upon the bland speaker, who was none other than the Old Boy of Tombstone.

"I'll take keer o' him. Look out fer your own health. Thar's sudden death in your face this minnit, an' I see it!"

"Jest a 'flection, purty boy. Ef you've got much property to leave to sorrerin' kin-folks, better make your will afore you pay me the fri'ndly call you talked of."

"It's *your* turn now. *Mine*' ll come next. I'm goin', now; but I've got one word more to say. I don't want no help to git my pard home. Nur I ain't a man what likes to be follered an' watched. That's plain enough talk, ain't it?"

He passed one of the gambler's arms around his neck, holding his hand fast, then encircled his waist with one sturdy arm, left the Bower and passed out into the moonlight.

Slowly he made his way down the street, casting keen glances around him, muttering savagely beneath his breath, but guarding the uncertain footsteps of his mate with a care that spoke well for his fidelity—the one grand virtue of an otherwise rough, hard, evil nature.

The fresh air, though still warm from the intense heat of the day—for even the glorious city of Tombstone hath its drawbacks, one of which is the torrid fervor of its summer sun, unrelieved by shade from tree or bush—soon wrought a favorable change in the condition of Carl Sherwood, and with each succeeding step he regained more of his wonted strength of limb, though Dan Abbles could feel him shivering and shaking like one with the worst of ague chills.

Through the town, and on up the rising ground to the north, leading to the hills where the principal mines of that district are situated, the gambler pards slowly toiled, pausing at length before a solitary shanty of rude slabs and sundried brick.

Here Dan Abbles gently removed his supporting arm, and unlocking the heavy door, pushed it open.

"Go in, mate, an' lay down. I'll take a little run about to see ef any o' them p'izen galoots hev dar'd to dog us here. They've hearn an' see'd jest enough to-night to want to know more, an' they'll git thar fill ef I sight 'em, *sure*!"

Without waiting for a reply, Abbles turned

and skulked back the way they came, hand on revolver, death in his eyes.

But his scout was productive of no results. There was not much cover to favor a spy. Not a tree, not a bush, save an occasional patch of sage brush or fantastic cacti. Here and there a stray rock; all else barren sand and gravel; one of the most dreary, desolate, God-forsaken regions on the foot-stool.

Back to the cabin Dan Abbles tramped, his brows corrugated, his thick lips firmly compressed, his eyes burning with a sullen light as he recalled and pondered over the strange events of that night.

There was a dimly burning candle in the shanty when he entered, and seated beside the table which supported it, was Carl Sherwood, still pale, still haggard, but with a more natural look in his face. Before him was a half-emptied bottle of brandy, and his drooping mustaches were wet with the powerful liquor, showing from whence his strength was drawn.

Dan Abbles dropped into or rather upon another stool, and planting his elbows upon the table, propped his bristling chin on his hands, staring fixedly into the pale face of his mate.

"Waal!" he ejaculated, gruffly. "What ye got to say?"

With a trembling hand, Carl Sherwood raised his newly filled glass to his lips, swallowing the contents at a gulp before replying to this blunt query.

"Dan, you never saw me this way before?"

"Nur I don't want to ag'in, old mate. What hit ye so p'izen hard? Not the money—though I reckon it leaves us mighty shoal on the bar, don't it?"

"I have a few dollars left—a hundred, maybe."

"Little enough to bu'st the big game fer which we come!" gloomily. "Not that I'd kick ef the dust went fa'r an' squar'; the wust inemy I ever hed couldn't say that Dan Abbles ever squealed *then*;—but to that slippery cuss, an' on a cold han'."

With strangely contorted features, Carl Sherwood thrust out one quivering hand, and the gambler paused.

"Not now;—I'll tell you all, but give me time."

"All right. When we sot out fer this cussed town, we greed that you was to pilot the con-sarn, while I played deck-han'. I won't go back on the 'rangement. Turn in, an' ketch a good sleep. Time enough to talk to-morrer. We can't do much else, now the boodle's gone—wuss luck!"

"We can! we *must*!" cried Sherwood, with fiery energy.

But this served only to utter those words. He fell back upon his rude seat, pale and trembling, while Dan Abbles stared in wonder at the wreck of one whom he had always believed the possessor of steel nerves and a will-power which nothing purely human could daunt or shake. In vain he sought to solve the mystery. It was far beyond his powers of comprehension.

With a hand which trembled until the neck of the bottle clinked sharply against the rim of his glass, Carl Sherwood poured out some more brandy and swallowed it. Then, speaking hoarsely, quickly, as though fearing the power to do so would entirely desert him, he said:

"When you come back, I'll tell you all, mate; but now you must go back to town."

"To wipe out that p'izen cuss?" eagerly interposed Dan, his sullen eyes all aflame with a lust for blood.

"No, not yet!" with a nervous start and quick glance around the little room, as though fearful the words would be overheard by others. "I must know what *he* knows, before he dies. *Then*—" his teeth closed with a savage click, and a lurid light filled his eyes, filling the hiatus even more plainly than though he had given full expression to the murderous thought in words.

Dan Abbles gave an approving nod, and his hard-set features relaxed with almost a smile, as he said:

"Good enough, old pard! Now I don't keer so much fer the loss o' the ducats. I was a fool. I thought you meant to jump the game fer good an' leave that dirty cuss winner. But I ort to 'a' knowed you better then that, after this time."

"Go down town, but steer clear of that—that fiend—for surely he is something more than mortal."

"Come! none o' that!" sharply cried Abbles, seeing his mate taking to trembling, and that wild, haunted look once more drifting into his eyes and over his whitening face. You want to choke off all sich durn fool thoughts as *them*. He's jest flesh an' blood like you an' me. A p'izen tricky cuss—that's all. He's got hold o' some old story in your past, an' he's playin' it down almighty fine; but I'll knock his cold hand higher'n a kite, whenever you turn me loose!"

This rude, blunt speech had the desired effect. With a violent effort, Carl Sherwood crushed down the superstitious terror which was chilling his very heart, and spoke again:

"You're a true mate, Dan. Some time I'll make amends. But now I'm all broken up."

"You only think so, old boy."

That was an unlucky term, though meant for one of endearment, and the haunted look returned, stronger than ever.

"Do you think so—that he is that—the Old Boy—"

With a stern and angry frown, which was not all assumed, Dan Abbles reached across the table and caught the trembling man by the shoulder, shaking him violently as he grated:

"Look yer, Carl Sherwood! You an' me hev bin bosom mates an' card pards fer nigh onto ten year. In all that time we never yit hed a ser'ous fallin' out, an' hardly ever a crooked word to fling at each other. 'Tain't many men who've led the rough life we hev as kin say as much without tellin' a lie; but *we* kin. Ain't that so?"

Sherwood nodded, seemingly afraid to trust his tongue.

"Good enough for the past. But it won't last no longer then this night, unless you brace up an' give all such p'izen foolishness the dirty shake forever. You kin savor that?"

"Don't drop me now, Dan, just when I need your level head and common sense the most."

"Then brace up and be a *man*. You kin do it ef you try. You've got to do it or we'll play quits from *now* on."

Doggedly Dan Abbles spoke, but his eyes were downcast, as though unwilling to encounter the startled, reproachful gaze of his gambler pard. Hard as they were for the latter to bear, those words were doubly hard for gruff Dan to speak, for he loved his aristocratic looking mate with the blind, unreasoning fidelity of a dog. But they served the purpose for which he intended them, and stung Carl Sherwood into a semblance of his usual self.

"I can't blame you, old man; but give me one chance more. I'll tell you all, but not just now. Give me time to think—time to collect my wits. Meantime, if you will, you can serve me to some purpose, by going back to town and finding out all that is known concerning that—the Old Boy of Tombstone."

With a gulp the peculiar title came out, and Dan Abbles gave an approving nod and encouraging grin.

"Don't make any stir or attract any more attention than you can possibly help, but learn all concerning him, and see if there is any connection between him and that woman. Find out when they came here—if alone or together. In a word, bottle up all the camp gossip relating to those two. It won't be hard to learn enough for my purpose. Tongues will wag freely enough down there this night!" breaking off in his feverish speech with a short, strained laugh.

"Ef I run afoul that black critter, an' he gives me any lip, I kin salivate him."

"On your life, no!" cried Sherwood, with startling earnestness. "I must know who and what he is before he dies—must learn how he came by that card—what his connection is with the past that I thought buried forever, long years ago. Keep away from *him*, Dan!"

"I will ef I kin; but he cain't spit in my face an' then rub it in. Even fri'ndship like ourn cain't ax *that*!"

"Nor does it, old friend. Only don't provoke a row. Serve me in this, and when you return I will tell you all. I feel that I must have a confidant or go mad! Bah!" throwing back his head with a defiant shake. "That's the last. Go, Dan, and when you come back you'll find a *man*! But bring a bottle or two of good brandy with you."

Abbles left the shanty and Sherwood barred the door behind him, then returned to his seat, bowing his head upon his arms as they rested on the table, his madly throbbing brain recalling one by one the strange events of the night, then drifting back into the tragic past—the past which he had believed buried forever in deepest oblivion.

Thus he sat when the returning footsteps of his mate aroused him from the gloomy reverie. Stiffly he arose, and lowered the massive bar. The door swung open, and Dan Abbles entered, his heavy eyes curiously scanning the pale, haggard face of his gambler pard.

"I'm better than I look, old man," said Sherwood, with a faint smile. "I've been doing a heap of thinking since you went, and it's been mighty hard and trying work; but I've managed to fight down the black devils that had me in their clutches, and I only need a little rest to be my old self once more."

"Better take it now then," interposed Abbles. "The night is gittin' purty well along, an' what I've larnt down yender won't hurt any by keepin' a while. Thar's your licker," producing a couple of bottles from beneath his coat and placing them on the table. "Take a big dose o' that med'cine, an' lay down fer a snooze. You'll be all right when day comes."

Sherwood shook his head with a faint smile, saying:

"I've got to unload first, old fellow. I couldn't sleep if I tried, with all the on my mind. But tell your story first. What did you find out, down in town?"

"Not so much as you mought think, but I reckon it'll be enough fer this time. They ain't no 'nection 'tween them two."

"You are sure?" with an eagerness almost painful.

"Ef thar is, nobody knows it 'cept them two," amended Abbles. "She come here a long time fust, not another soul with her. Broke ground fer the Bower the very next day. Give public notice that she hed come to stay—that she meant to run a fust-class house in every reespect, with a tip-up bar, an' a squar' game without limit—jest as we hearn tell afore we 'cluded to strike the durned old hole."

A slight smile curled the drooping mustaches.

"For all that, she deals faro with a combination box."

Abbles stared at him in open-mouthed amazement.

"Not this evenin'? See how she lost! Why, man, the bank was bu'sted wide open by that young feller."

"Thanks to her skill, not his playing; though he showed wonderful grit in sticking to the queen—if grit it was. I own that it puzzles me, but not that run of luck. Twice I caught her slipping a double, and each time it was to make the bank lose. Either she is in love with that softy, and wants to enrich him without his knowledge of how it comes about, or else the bank capital is furnished by some outside party, and she is leagued with that fellow to beat the bank. But let that go for the present. I'll sift it to the bottom before I give up the game we set out to play, but just now I'd rather hear the rest of your report."

"Ef you will, you will, an' we mought as well take it easy while talkin'," said Dan, sitting down and knocking off the head of one bottle against the edge of the table.

The gambler pards drank, then Sherwood nodded.

"You mean 'bout that old man with a boy's face, or boy with the head-kiverin' of an old man? Durned ef I could tell which, ef you was to putt me on oath!"

"Never mind now; who and what is he?"

"Now you got me, mate; durned ef I'll ever tell ye!" and Dan rubbed the tip of his nose thoughtfully.

"But you found out something about him?" impatiently.

"Plenty, sech as it is, but whether it'll suit your book is more'n I kin guess. Ef I knowed what keerds you're holdin' back, I could come closter the combination."

"You shall know everything; only speak out!"

"Waal, the old critter come to Tombstone fer the fust time, som'ers 'bout a week back. Rid in on the stage, like any common human; but from that time on, the devil hes bin to pay. Tricks an' unhealthy fun tell you caln't rest! An' that frosty-headed critter at the bottom of it all!"

"You saw that overgrown feller he called Peter Poppun? Afore he come, Pete was a quiet, sober miner, with one eye on his day's work, an' the other keepin' watch over a little petticut which runs a wash-house; chain-lightnin' done up in dry-goods, they say, who bossed Pete most onmercifully. Not hitched on yit, but courtin'."

"That old coon stuck in his finger, an' Pete hes gone plum crazy. Cuts up the durned tricks an' didoes. But you kin jedge somethin' of that by what he did this evenin'."

"Never mind Peter. The old fellow is a mesmerist, and a good one, too. I tried him to-night, and I never met a man with half his will-power. But go on."

"That's 'bout all. The old cuss don't 'pear to hev any reg'lar business. Got plenty o' ducats, an' slings them 'round mighty keerless. Jest whar he lives or sleeps, nobody 'pears to know. When you look fer him, he ain't thar; when he ain't wanted, he turns up like a speret; an' more'n one o' the boys say right out flat that ef he ain't the devil hisself, he's mighty cluss kin to the old gent!"

Carl Sherwood leaned his head on one hand, and for some moments seemed buried in deep thought. Abbles watched him closely, and was on the point of breaking the silence, when his mate roused up and poured out another glass of brandy.

"If you care to listen, old friend, I'll tell you the story of that bullet-pierced ace of diamonds, and why the unexpected sight of it took away all my nerve," he said.

CHAPTER VII.

"IN THE GOOD OLD DAYS BEFORE THE WAR." LATE one night in the fall of the year 1857—little more than twenty-two years previous to the events which have been detailed as occurring in the lively mining camp of Tombstone—there was a highly interested gathering at one of the private club-rooms in the city of New Orleans.

Two young men were seated opposite each other at a small card-table, the center of which was piled high with coin and bank-notes, topped with a written check or two.

The faces of both were pale and hard-set, and a close observer might have detected a slight trembling in the hands which clasped a few cards each: but no one noticed this now.

Interested observers there were, nearly a score in all, surrounding a table at a respectful distance, eager to see every detail of this remarkable game, but scarcely breathing for fear of jarring the nerves already strained almost to breaking. For hours the interest had been so high as to put an end to all other games, and center every eye, every thought on those rivals in play as in love; but now that sentiment had grown fairly painful, for all could see that the crisis had come, that the end was close at hand.

With one more glance at the cards in his hand, as though to assure himself that he had made no mistake as to its value, the eldest appearing of the two gamblers hastily filled out a bank check and signed it, dropping it upon the pile, saying:

"That covers your raise—what have you got?"

Instead of replying, his adversary picked up the check and scanned it closely, appearing to be engaged in a mental calculation, a peculiar gleam in his dark eyes.

A hot flush rose to the temples of his rival, and there was an angry ringing in his voice as he demanded:

"Do you mean to insult me, Frank Arnold? Do you detect anything irregular about that check? Is it not perfectly satisfactory?"

Those keen black eyes shot a swift glance into the face of the speaker, and a slight smile curled the thin, smooth shorn lips, but the most carping could not have found fault with the words or tone in which he made reply:

"Thoroughly satisfactory, Mr. Laurent."

"Glad to hear you say so, for you were scrutinizing that bit of paper as though you were a Jew money-lender, instead of a gentleman," with the least possible emphasis on the final word.

"We are playing cards, Harold Laurent, and you are experienced enough to know that nothing is taken for granted at poker," quietly retorted Arnold.

"And you have gambled enough to know that when a gentleman calls he is entitled to see your hand. Show down!"

In silence Frank Arnold dropped his cards, with a smooth, dexterous motion that spread them out in an even row, laying the face of each open to full view—a red streak, which drew forth a murmur of wonder from the interested spectators, for they had expected something more than a simple flush from a hand on which so many thousands were staked.

Not less surprised was Harold Laurent, and his white face became crimson as he faced his cards—among them four aces.

There was more than money at stake in this game, more than the coveted reputation of being the boldest and best short-card player in a circle where high playing was the rule, and none save the most skillful dare lay lance in rest.

From the earliest day which either could remember, Harold Laurent and Frank Arnold had been rivals, even as it had been the same with their parents before them. Both of the seniors had been planters on an extensive scale in Louisiana, their estates adjoining each other.

It is not essential to the story we have to tell to go into minute particulars of how the once bosom friends became deadly enemies. Enough that a dispute arose over the ownership of a bit of land—worth only a few dollars, though it eventually cost two if not more lives before the trifling difference was finally adjusted.

Suit was brought, the case was tried and decided in several different ways, each appealing in turn as the suit went against him. At last the two planters came to blows, and the lie was exchanged. A hostile meeting followed, and at the first fire both fell, one shot through the brain and dying instantly, the other mortally wounded, life going out even as he was borne into his house, the agonizing shriek of his widowed wife being the last sound that greeted his ears.

Harold and Frank were then three years old. They had first drawn the breath of life on the same day—almost at the same hour. They were only children. They were the pride of their parents—now the sole joy and comfort of their widowed mothers, neither of whom ever fully recovered from the terrible shock of that tragic day. Each implicitly believed the version of the dispute as given by their husbands, and deeming the other in the wrong, they brought up their sons to hate and scorn the neighboring heir as the child of a murderer.

As the boys grew older, this dislike grew with them, and those who best knew the secret history of the now almost-forgotten tragedy, nodded their heads sapiently as they predicted another fatal encounter in the not distant future. And no doubt their boding predictions would have proven true, but for the so-called code of honor falling into such disrepute before the youthful rivals attained to manhood's estate. Even then it might have been the case, had their revengeful mothers lived; but when the lads were just entering their 'teens, the widows died—by another strange coincidence, on the same day, of the same disease.

Before dying, they performed almost the only wise act of their widowed life, leaving their

sons in charge of sober, honest, God-fearing gentlemen during their minority.

Residing on a plantation not many miles distant from those of the youthful rivals, was a gentleman named Ayres, who likewise had an only child, named Myrtle. He was not rich, though in quite comfortable circumstances, and was a man who believed in taking life easily. The sole point on which he could be angered, was that of dueling, to which he was most bitterly opposed. He would never recognize one who had made his debut on the field of honor, but swore that, had he the making of the laws, he would hang all duelists as murderers, and bury them at the cross roads, with a stake through their vile carcasses!

This decided opinion, too, was not without its effect in keeping the young men apart, for—and the hand of fate seemed to be in it all—both Harold and Frank tumbled over head and ears in love with gay, dashing Myrtle, and would not willingly do aught to forfeit their chances—small enough at best, for sturdy Marmaduke Ayres declared that "like father like son," and did all his otherwise mild and kindly nature would permit, to discourage the rival suitors, and break off the acquaintance between him and his idolized child.

But that was not much. From her birth Myrtle had been suffered to have pretty much her own way, and the only marvel was that she had not been too roughly spoiled by indulgence. A bit of a coquette by nature, honestly inherited from her dead mother, she flirted to her heart's content, not only with Harold Laurent and Frank Arnold, but half a score of other young planters and professional men. So perfect was the skill with which she played her part, difficult enough at first, but daily growing more and more so as the love of her adorers grew with the food it fed on, that each one of them all felt confident of ultimate success, felt that while the gay, dashing belle was simply amusing her leisure hours with them, with him she was true and earnest.

Lovely as a houri, full of life and spirit or soft and melting as the mood indicated, Myrtle ruled right royally for a time; but then came a change.

One after another her lovers tested their fate, and retired from the field, sore-hearted, but loving the fair empress of hearts better than ever before—friends, not enemies.

Of all, only Harold Laurent and Frank Arnold remained in the field, and speculation ran high as to which one of these two would carry off the coveted prize. Then, too, the old tale of bloodshed was revived, and few were they who believed that the affair could end without the sacrifice of at least one life. The rivals were known to be high-spirited and courageous, to have cast their all on the hope of winning their love and humiliating the other, and it was whispered that the happy bridegroom would have to break his fast on powder and lead.

Thus matters stood to the outward eye at the date with which this chapter opens. Both Laurent and Arnold had visited New Orleans to attend to business relating to their crops, and as they both were members of the same club, on this evening they had come together, mainly through the sly maneuvers of a mutual friend who had aspired to the honor of Myrtle Ayres's hand, and failing, took a malicious pleasure in fomenting the quarrel, or rather warming the bad blood which all knew existed between the young planters.

One word led to another, until, to test the skill which each one believed he possessed in a greater degree, the rivals sat down to play poker.

All things taken into consideration, high play was to be expected, but even the veterans of the club were soon aghast as they saw how greatly the truth exceeded their expectations, and the better-disposed among them sought to terminate the tilt, or at least keep it within reasonable bounds. But their well-meant efforts were worse than vain. Both Harold and Frank had drank freely, though the cold nature of the latter showed it less outwardly, and the result was the exact reverse of what was intended.

The deciding hand was dealt not long after midnight, and bet after bet was seen and raised, until not only all their ready money, but several checks for large amounts, lay on the table—a fortune depending on a single hand of cards.

Until now Harold Laurent had held his hot passions in check with a remarkable nerve, considering the fact that his entire fortune hung in the balance. If he lost he would not only be without a dollar in ready money, but he would have to sell slaves or mortgage his land to take up his last check.

Little wonder, then, that a short cry of triumph broke from his lips as he faced his cards, and put out one white hand to claim the enormous stakes.

And Frank Arnold? A hard, bitter laugh parted his lips, a mocking smile swept over his dark countenance, and a red light flashed into his black eyes as he said:

"Don't burn your fingers, my dear sir. That pot belongs to me, if I am not sadly mistaken!"

"To you—" began Laurent, but his voice was

drowned by the cries of surprise and excitement which burst from the lookers-on around the table, and then he, too, made the fatal discovery.

"Ay! to me!" echoed Arnold, but still without a trace of growing excitement. "Let your own eyes decide, and if you still fail to comprehend that a sequence flush is a higher hand than even four aces, allow me to call your attention to Section 20, Article XIV, of the rules governing this club and its members."

A swift, imperious wave of the white hand interrupted his fluent speech, and Harold Laurent answered him, without the faintest sign of emotion in either face or tones:

"No one is disputing your claim, Mr. Arnold. If there was a momentary misunderstanding, you are to blame for not more fully exposing your hand. The corner of one card covered the odd spot on your seven, making it appear the six, instead, and thus breaking the sequence. The oversight was all the more natural, since those two hands would never fall together twice in a lifetime, unless there was deliberately foul dealing."

The flush died out of the dark cheeks, and there was a dangerous ring to the tones of Frank Arnold as he demanded:

"Do you insinuate foul dealing in this instance, sir?"

"I never insinuate," was the cold retort. "If I felt that you had been guilty of foul play, you would not be sitting there, for I would have shot you like a dog. No, sir; remarkable though it be, I am assured that those hands are entirely legitimate. You have won, and the pot is yours."

"One moment, Mr. Laurent," hastily uttered Arnold, as his rival rose from his chair as though about to take departure. "You have lost a large sum—"

"Pray how does that concern you, further than to gather up your winnings?" was the cold interruption.

"I was about to offer you your revenge, but if you have lost your nerve for further play, I'll say no more."

The tone was quiet and even respectful, but for all that, it cut the hot-spirited planter to the very quick. To his doubly-excited brain, it seemed to cover a contemptuous pity. There was danger in his flashing eyes as he turned upon his rival, and an old friend of his family who was standing beside him, caught his clinched fist with a nervous solicitude.

That touch served to calm him. He would not quarrel over the gaming-table. A violent effort sufficed to restore control of his temper, and he said:

"Pray, pardon my interruption, and finish your sentence, Mr. Arnold. Waste no words, and I will be equally pointed."

"Thanks. I have won from you, counting cash and checks, a trifle over seventy-four thousand dollars—"

"Never mind the details—come to the point."

"Which sum, added to my own stakes, amounts to one hundred and forty-eight thousand dollars."

"A country pedagogue could not be more exact," sneered Laurent, adding, with a flash of irritation: "Did you request my attention simply that I might listen to your boyish crowing over your winnings? If so, good-night."

"Mr. Laurent, from the outset I have treated you as one gentleman should treat another. I am still doing so. That gives me the moral right to expect the same courtesy from you. Am I right, gentlemen?"

A murmur of assent followed from those to whom he appealed. They could do no less, and Harold saw that he was considered in the wrong. Keenly as it chafed him, he yielded.

"If you take those grounds, I have no option save to hear what you have to say. But—as one gentleman to another—I beg that you will make your statement as brief as possible."

Arnold bowed with a blandness which was particularly irritating, before responding.

"Thanks. I will not consume much of your time, my dear sir. And now to business."

"Your plantation, though not in the market, of course, is rated at a hundred thousand, or thereabouts, including slaves and fixtures, I believe?"

In silence Laurent bowed, not caring to trust his tongue.

"Your estate and mine join each other. United, they would make a splendid piece of property. If you say the word, united they shall be, from this night on."

"Speak plainer. I am not sure that I understand you," slowly uttered Laurent.

Before replying, Arnold rapidly filled out another check, and placed it on the pile before him. It was payable to the bearer, and called for two thousand dollars.

"That foots up one-third more than your property would fetch in open market. I will wager the entire amount against your plantation, on a single hand of poker, either straight or draw. Now you see what I am driving at. Have you the sand to test your fortune that far?"

"Gentlemen, I protest!" exclaimed the president of the club. "We are associated together

for amusement, not ruin. This affair must go no further—"

"That rests with Mr. Laurent," coldly interrupted Arnold. "I have made the challenge, and I shall stand by it, until he does one of two things—accepts, or admits that the stakes are too high—"

"Stop!" cried Laurent, sharply. "You have said enough, and more than enough, Frank Arnold. I would play you now, though the devil himself stood at your elbow to whisper advice! But when the game is ended, I will have something to whisper in your ear which may test your sand!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A STARTLING PROPOSITION.

"You will find me ready to listen, and quite as prompt to take a hint as yourself, Harold Laurent," was the calm, but significant retort. "We are agreed, then, on the one important point: I wager this money against your plantation, the ownership to be decided on the value of a single hand at poker?"

"With this proviso," coldly uttered Laurent. "If I win, we will play one more game or hand, each staking his entire plantation, the loser to bind himself to leave the State and never enter it again while the winner lives."

"I accept the amendment," with a hard laugh. "Wide as are the boundaries of old Louisiana, they would be all too narrow to contain you and I after this night—"

"Unless one of the twain took up his abode in the grave. But a truce to compliments of this sort. Business before pleasure."

Once more the venerable president of the club interposed in the forlorn hope of amicably settling the difficulty, which bade fair to bring no little discredit on the organization.

"Gentlemen, as the father of the club, as the personal friend and well-wisher of you both, I beg that you will suffer this unfortunate affair to drop just where it is. Or," he added, as he noted a dissenting frown on the face of each one of the rivals, "at least sleep on it—take time to look at the matter in the right light—"

Harold Laurent grasped his hand with a cordial pressure, but, though his voice was respectful, his words showed how little that appeal had shaken him.

"On any other point, general, your word would be law to me, but your own delicate sense of honor must tell you that after matters have gone so far, neither Mr. Arnold nor myself can retreat a single step without discredit."

The president drew himself up stiffly. The look of imploring anxiety vanished from his face, leaving it cold and hard, while his eyes glittered like polished steel.

"Very good. I have tried my best to act the part of a sincere friend to you both, only to have my services peremptorily declined. I have still the duty which devolves on me as the president of this organization to perform, and by the Lord of Israel! I'll carry it out or die in the effort!"

"There is no rule which limits our betting, so long as the debts thus incurred are canceled within the three days' grace," quietly uttered Frank Arnold.

"So much the worse—but there shall be, if I live long enough to carry the point. This club shall never be disgraced again after this fashion—"

"You are too greatly excited, general, to consider just how your words sound—"

"I am responsible for every word I utter, Mr. Arnold. If they cut, you are the one mainly responsible for their being spoken. Stop! Hear me through—then you can reply. I repeat it; you have played a part in this affair, cunning and subtle as though the foul fiend himself stood at your elbow to dictate every word that dropped from your lips! You have used every means in your power to irritate and goad your antagonist, but all so cunningly veiled that, while the sting was none the less acute, in no single particular could you be called to account—"

"You are bold, general!" rudely interrupted Arnold, his dark face flushed, his eyes gleaming like those of an angered serpent. "I can make some allowance for gray hairs—"

"My gray hairs shall never serve as a shield for my person, Mr. Arnold," was the grave, cold interruption. "As a gentleman of honor, I might readily find an excuse for declining to meet you on equal terms, after your reprehensible conduct this evening. As the president of this club, on which you and Mr. Laurent are casting dishonor, I will not only meet you, but will force you to the field, if any compulsion is needed. After that, if I am alive, I will make the same demand of you, Mr. Laurent."

"Gentlemen, your servant—until to-morrow," and with a stiff, dignified bow, he took up his hat and cane and left the room, amid a dead silence that was almost painful.

Frank Arnold was the first to break the silence.

"Something the old gentleman ate for supper has evidently soured on his stomach; but let him go his own gait for the present. To-morrow is not here yet, while these ducats

await a final owner. Mr. Laurent, have you any further suggestions to offer before we get down to business?"

"Only this: Since a single straight hand is to settle the matter, let one of these gentlemen shuffle the cards and do the dealing. Then the loser will have no cause to blame himself or aught but a perverse fortune."

"Just what I thought of proposing," promptly said Arnold. "Steward, a fresh pack of cards this way, if you please."

After the worse than vain intervention of their venerable president, the members of the club resigned all hope of checking the mad game, and began to enter more fully into the reckless spirit which appeared to animate the rivals. Few, if any of them, entertained his extreme views, and now that matters had gone so far, nearly all were eager to serve in the capacity of fortune's almoner.

Keen eyed Frank Arnold saw this, and with his usual tact, while the steward was gone after the cards, he made another point in his own favor.

"Gentlemen, Mr. Laurent has suggested that one of your number act as dealer, and I am more than willing, provided any of you will consent to serve us that far. I know that it is anything but a pleasant position, and for that reason I suggest that you decide the choice between you by cutting or facing a card—always provided Mr. Laurent is agreeable."

"It is wholly immaterial to me; settle it between yourselves, gentlemen," coldly uttered Harold, lighting a cigar and resuming his seat at the table.

The lot was speedily cast, and the chosen dealer first caused the rivals to see that the stamp on the cards had not been broken before he tore off the wrapper before their eyes, then shuffled the pasteboards thoroughly.

Arnold declined to cut the cards when they were first offered to him, motioning them toward Laurent, who impatiently shook his head.

"Deal the cards, Brown; this affair is growing tedious," he said, smothering a yawn behind one white hand.

Evincing far more nervousness than did either of the twain who had so much at stake, the young man complied, passing the cards one by one and alternately to the rivals.

Their manner of receiving them was very different. Harold leaned back in his chair, smoking placidly, as though he had nothing at stake, instead of his entire fortune. Arnold showed quite as thorough pluck, though after another fashion.

As the cards were dealt him, he deftly turned them over, face upward, so that all could see how fortune was treating him; and as his chances of gaining even a respectably-decent hand for the enormous interests at stake grew less and less, the faces of the spectators grew paler, and their suppressed excitement almost unbearable.

An ace came first, followed, in order of dealing, by a tray, deuce, king, and then a second deuce.

A short, hard laugh parted the young planter's lips as he turned the last card, but not the faintest sign of trepidation or nervousness did he betray, while his voice was never more even or careless than at that moment.

"Not a remarkably-brilliant prospect for yours truly—eh, gentlemen? Hardly enough to wager a good cigar on, but I can't complain. Fortune can't always run in the same groove, and she has given me a full share of her favors this evening."

Without changing his indolent position in the least, Laurent reached out and took up his cards with a hand that seemed as steady as fate itself, and without glancing at their faces, turned the cards over so that all could see.

An eager rustling, a moment of breathless suspense, then a silence like that of the grave, as the truth became known.

In the exposed hand could be discovered neither pair, flush nor simple straight, and though Arnold's hand contained but a single pair, and that of the very lowest denomination, it was enough to win stakes aggregating a quarter of a million—probably the largest amount ever won by so slight a hand.

Money, slaves, plantation, all gone, when the odds were a hundred to one that he would win—yet not the slightest sign of regret, chagrin or agitation could those close yet covertly observing eyes discover in the face or voice of the young planter, whom fate had treated so cruelly that night.

"You have won, Mr. Arnold," he said, his voice steady and smooth, under perfect control.

"You shall have possession after the termination of the usual grace. Is that satisfactory?"

"Perfectly," with a low bow.

"Then, gentlemen, one last drink with you, for the sake of old times. I shall regret the club and with it the loss of your society more than all else—but you know the old saw: needs must when the devil drives—and if our—I should say your—president does not turn me toes up to the daisies, as he politely intimated was his solemn intention, I shall seek fresh fields and pastures new after to-morrow."

"One moment, Mr. Laurent," interposed the

cold, smooth voice of Arnold, as the loser arose from his chair.

For the first time since his great loss, the white face of the young planter flushed, and the old angry light came back to his eyes as he wheeled upon the speaker.

"Is not your hungry maw satisfied yet? You have won my plantation, my slaves, my money, even to the last dollar I could call my own. There is nothing more for you to win—nothing more for you to say to me, unless you can think of a friend who may wish a private consultation with my representative. In that case I will listen with sincere pleasure!"

"In plainer words, if I will challenge you to a duel!"

"Really, your penetration is remarkable, my dear sir!"

"Thanks," with a careless bow in return for the one of mockery. "You forget that we are already under defiance, and for a man of his white hairs, the general is both a dead shot and a marvelously neat hand with the rapier. Still, I will accept your hint thus far. If we both survive our interviews with the president, I will meet you when, where and how you may dictate. But that was not my object in addressing you. I wish to give you one more chance to get even—"

"That is folly," said Laurent, coldly. "I have not a dollar that I can call my own, and I will not try to borrow."

"Nor do I ask you. Nevertheless, I will give you a fair chance to win back all of your money, your plantation, slaves and fixtures, on a single hand, a single game, a rubber, or a series of games, leaving all those particulars to your decision. What do you say?"

"What can I say, save that your remarkable good fortune this evening must have unsettled your brain. I have nothing to stake against such a large sum, and not even you dare insult me by offering to play again for what you have fairly won!" hotly retorted Laurent, his eyes flashing.

"I am not quite so Quixotic as all that comes to," with a short laugh. "But I still insist that you are a richer man than you seem to credit. You can stake the equivalent of what I have won. The question is, will you dare do so?"

"You will know better what I dare do before the week is at end. But let that word pass for the present. If there is any reason in your talk, let me have it."

Frank Arnold drew a revolver, and cocking it, placed the weapon on the table, convenient to his grasp. An ugly light came into the blue eyes of his rival, as he demanded:

"May I ask the meaning of that, Mr. Arnold?"

"To kill you before you can kill me, in case you should take offense at what I have to say," was the cool response.

"That will hardly save you if you give me just cause for burning powder," retorted Laurent, his lip curling scornfully. "Say what you have to say, and end this trifling."

"I prefer to keep it private, between us two."

"You can have nothing to say to me that these gentlemen are not at full liberty to hear. If you were as honest and gentlemanly as you pretend, you would never make such a proposition as that."

"And if I were not bound by the challenge which you heard the general intimate, you would be more careful in picking your words, Mr. Laurent. Once more, will you hear my proposal? After it is made you are at perfect liberty to decline the challenge, if your courage fails you; and whether you accept or refuse, you will have full liberty to disclose all to these gentlemen, if you care to do so."

"With that understanding I will listen. Be brief."

Harold Laurent bent over the table and Frank Arnold placed his lips close to the ear of his rival, whispering:

"All I have won from you against your solemn pledge to break all ties which may now exist between yourself and Myrtle Ayres, to never seek nor address her after this night, to never explain to her the cause of the change. This if you lose. If you win, your money and property to be restored intact, and all else to go on as before."

With a burning curiosity which words can hardly express the gentlemen gathered around watched the face of Harold Laurent while Frank Arnold was whispering in his ear. Some few of their number suspected the purport of that communication, knowing as they did that the young men were rivals in love, but even they were puzzled to account for the swift-varying changes which swept over the face of Harold Laurent.

His face flushed scarlet as the first hissing words reached his brain, then turned pale as death itself. For a moment his countenance was that of one fairly beside himself with rage, deadly, yet cold. But then a peculiar smile curled his lips, and a strange light glittered in his eyes.

Frank Arnold drew back as he ceased whispering, and cast a keen glance into the face of his rival. It was cold and composed, now, and

he could read nothing there. For the first time on that trying evening, his nerve began to fail him. His fingers twitched, and so did his thin lips, despite his utmost efforts to hold them under control, and a hot curse seethed deep down in his heart, for he saw that Harold, gazing steadily at him, noted these tell-tale weaknesses.

To cover them, he lit a cigar and veiled his face in a cloud of blue smoke.

"You have heard my proposal, Harold Laurent," he said, his voice sounding hoarse and unnatural in his efforts to hold it steady. "What is your decision? Will you make one more effort to retrieve your fortune, or will you acknowledge that your boasted nerve fails you, and go out from this room a penniless beggar?"

A sharp murmur of disapproval broke from the gentlemen, at this brutal speech, but Laurent only smiled—a cold, peculiar smile which did little toward restoring his adversary to his customary self-reliance.

"Peace, gentlemen," he said, with a calm wave of his hand. "It is hardly fair to judge Mr. Arnold by the rules of common courtesy which govern the intercourse and speech of gentlemen, for he has this night placed himself beyond the pale of decency—Touch that pistol if you dare, coward!" he cried, sternly, as Arnold moved a hand toward the weapon, his face white with anger. "I will prove my words, leaving the company present to judge between us, or I will beg your pardon on my bended knees!"

"Gentlemen, it is an open secret that both Mr. Arnold and myself have been paying our suit to the same lady. It now appears that he distrusts his powers of winning her love, and he proposes to wager his winnings against my pledge to withdraw from the field, in case I lose."

"In answer to his unique proposition, I have only this to say: The lady in question has been my lawfully wedded wife for the last three months—"

"You lie! It's false as hell itself!" screamed Arnold.

Like lightning the clinched right hand shot out across the table, lighting fairly between the infuriated schemer's eyes, knocking him endlong across the room!

CHAPTER IX.

WAGERING A LIFE ON A CARD.

THE words were still hot upon Frank Arnold's lips, when the insult they conveyed was avenged by a blow straight from the shoulder, and delivered with a power that surprised even the man who dealt it, for in that blow was concentrated all the hatred and yearning for revenge which had been storing up, not only through that night, but for months past.

Raised clear out of his chair, Frank Arnold was hurled headlong nearly twice his own length away before his head and shoulders first touched the floor, and then he lay in a quivering heap, the faint, convulsive twitching of his hands and feet alone distinguishing him from a dead man.

The moment his stroke was delivered, Harold Laurent leaped to his feet, his face white as death, his eyes blazing with a fire so intense that it seemed capable of searing whatever it rested upon. For the time being he was a madman. For hours past, he had only held his passions in check by the most desperate efforts, and now that the barrier had broken down, he was no longer accountable for his actions.

Those among the party who knew him best, realized this, and to keep him from committing murder on a helpless foe, as he surely would have done but for their intervention, they called to each other for aid, and grappled with the young Hercules.

The struggle was desperate, but brief. Laurent recovered his senses, and ceasing his mad wrestling, panted:

"Let up, gentlemen! That foul-mouthed cur is safe from the weight of my hand, unless he repeats his words."

"The poor devil was drunk, and hardly knew what he was saying. He will be sorry for it all in the morning, and no doubt will make what amends he can. Until then—come with me, old fellow, and we'll talk it over in my rooms," urged one of the party, hoping to get Laurent out of the way before the fallen planter could recover his senses sufficiently to say or do something still more unfortunate.

Harold readily divined his purpose, but would not yield to it, quickly, yet not discourteously freeing his arm.

"You mean well, no doubt, Barron, but you are considering Arnold more than you are me. I knocked him down, and would repeat the action on the same provocation, but still he is a member of this club, and that carries with it the title of a gentleman. Not even my worst enemy shall say that I hurried away while he lay unconscious."

"It will end in bloodshed—"

"It is bound to do that, anyway, after what has passed between us two this night, for to give the devil his due, the fellow has plenty of grit, with sense enough to know that he would

be hooted out of respectable society were he to overlook a blow like that!"

"But here, at the club—think of what will be said—"

"Too late for any such reflection now. The quarrel began here, and may as well find an ending in the same place. That, however, remains mainly with Mr. Arnold," said Laurent, quietly, but with a firmness that showed his agitated friend how worse than useless it was for him to argue further.

Several of the party were gathered around Frank Arnold, and their prompt ministrations quickly restored his consciousness. Almost the first object on which his bloodshot eyes rested was the form of his rival, seated at the table, carelessly shuffling the cards by means of which ruin had overwhelmed him, and that sight, more than all else, caused his powers to rally, and he struggled to his feet, wiping away the blood which trickled from a cut between his eyes.

Cold and calm as though he had never given way to mad passion, Harold Laurent encountered that baleful glare. Usually considered a very handsome man, Frank Arnold's face was now fairly hideous—that of a fiend thirsting for human blood—and those from whose grasp he had released himself, with a sudden motion, involuntarily moved between the rivals, fearing murder would follow, since they knew that both men were armed.

Frank Arnold read their actions aright, and a short, unnatural laugh parted his livid lips.

"You are taking unnecessary trouble, gentlemen. I have not the slightest intention of drawing weapon on Mr. Laurent just at present, unless he tries to run away to avoid hearing what I have to say. In that case, I'll shoot him as I would a cowardly cur that snapped at my heels and then fled before I could kick him in return."

Laurent listened with a curling lip, but ere he could make reply, Barron, who had held a hasty consultation with his closest neighbors, interposed.

"Gentlemen, I beg of you to listen to me for one moment. This lamentable affair must go no further to-night—"

Arnold interrupted him with a savage intensity that caused the blood to chill in more than one of his hearers' veins, his voice hoarse and strained:

"Not you, nor your friends, nor all Orleans, can enforce that dictum, Fred Barron! I have been dealt a cowardly blow, and I swear to wipe out that stain before another sun rises!"

"All that was cowardly about the blow was that it checked a coward's insult," coldly uttered Laurent. "But I agree with you that no time is like the present for settling our difference. As soon as the truth of your actions of to-night become generally known, this club will have to expel you, or in a measure share your disgrace. Branded as a scoundrel, unfit for gentlemen to associate with, I could not lower myself to meet you on an equal footing. For that reason, while you still remain a member, we had better settle accounts."

Stung beyond endurance by that cold, merciless voice, uttering words that cut to the very heart, a hoarse snarl of devilish fury and hatred burst from Arnold, and he jerked out a revolver, while Laurent also armed himself and arose.

"Between them, gentlemen—do not permit murder!" cried Barron, setting the example.

Instantly Arnold was overpowered and disarmed, despite his furious struggles, while Laurent gave up his weapons without remonstrance when he saw this.

Flushed and angry, Barron spoke rapidly and to the point.

"You have turned an orderly and until now respectable club-room into a bear-garden. I am strongly tempted to give you both in charge of the police—and by the heavens above us! I'll do so yet, unless you pass your words of honor to conduct yourselves a little more like gentlemen should! Kill each other, if you are determined to do so—I begin to believe that if you could both succeed in doing that, it would vastly improve the atmosphere of Orleans—but let it be in a little more decent fashion, for the credit of the club!"

Never before had any of those present beheld the fat little gentleman in a rage, and there was something so comical now in his vehemence, turning first to one and then the other of the rivals, his stumpy arms sawing the air with gestures more earnest than graceful, that a smile crept over the pale countenance of Harold Laurent, while even Arnold seemed less irritated.

The former spoke first, cool and deliberate.

"You have my word not to begin hostilities, Mr. Barron. I only drew to defend my life when threatened. At the same time, if Mr. Arnold demands immediate satisfaction of me for the blow I dealt him, neither you nor any other man can dictate my course of action."

"Nor do I wish to do so. You must fight—there can be no alternative, after all that has happened—but let it be according to rule, not like a drunken squabble as of ruffians. In saying this, I trust I am expressing your sentiments, as well as my own, gentlemen."

The party appealed to, cordially indorsed his words.

During this interval, Frank Arnold recovered fully from the confusing shock of that terrible blow, and now, outwardly, at least, was once more the cool, steel-nerved man of the world, all the more dangerous because of that calmness.

"An apology is due from me to you, gentlemen, for my rudeness, and in all sincerity I tender it now."

A cold bow was all the response vouchsafed, and Arnold saw that he had lost more ground with those present than he would ever be able to recover, but just then that fact troubled him but little. He had thoughts only for his revenge.

"My next words are to you, Mr. Laurent," with a low bow. "Will you listen to me?"

"Certainly," was the cold response. "May I beg you to be as brief as possible?"

"We will hardly both live to enjoy another conversation together, and that fact should lend us patience—but I will not detain you longer than I can help," and he coolly seated himself at the table on the opposite side.

"What I desire to say first, may savor some of boasting, but the fact that it is the truth, must be my defense. Though you may be loth to acknowledge the fact, I am your superior with every or any weapon which can possibly be used in the duello. Do you grant that claim?"

"Whether I do or not, matters little, I imagine. Still, if the admission will hasten your conclusion in the least, pray consider it as made," was the careless response.

"Which means that you doubt the assertion, but all the same it is well founded, as the records will amply prove, if the investigation is made. But we will not dispute the question. I simply allude to the fact, that none may doubt the perfect sincerity with which I make the following offer:

"You have struck me a blow with your hand. I shall kill you for that, just as surely as we confront each other on the field of honor."

"Unless I kill you," was the cool amendment.

"Even that would not save your life. My hatred is so intense that even though a bullet or a rapier was to pierce my heart, death would not come until I had punished you!"

"That would be an interesting sight, well worth rising early and riding far to witness. But is this business?"

"Simply preliminary. I wish you to see that it is not through fear of your prowess, or from any doubts as to my own, that I make this offer—to give you one chance to leave the world a man of property and honor—"

"Guard your words, Mr. Arnold!" cried Laurent, his eyes gleaming with a dangerous light. "Not even my present association with you can cast even the slightest stain upon my honor—and a greater danger than that I cannot imagine!"

"I can," was the calm response. "More than that, I can prove my words, even by your own confession. Shall I do so?"

"If you can—bah! you are cur enough to hint anything, and I am a fool for indulging you so far."

A hard, vindictive smile curled the gambler's lip, as he carefully sorted over the checks which still remained upon the table, selecting therefrom the one which he had examined so closely when it was first written to call his last bet.

"Now that matters have gone so far, I do not mind admitting to you that I followed you here to-night with the express intention of ruining you, or quitting the club room a beggar. In making this resolve, I first fully acquainted myself with the state of your finances. I know to a dollar what you were worth when you stepped into the room. I knew that you had wagered more than you could pay without mortgaging your plantation, or selling some of your slaves or personal property. For that reason, among others, I drew you on to stake them, as well. You did so, and I won."

"Now sir, this check which I hold in my hand, if presented to the bank, with the others, would be refused for want of assets—and yet you laugh at the idea of dishonor assailing your fair name!"

"You are making a mountain out of a molehill," coldly retorted the other. "When I wrote that check, it was with the intention of selling some of my slaves as you hint. They are lost, I admit, but long before the three days of grace expire, there shall be funds in the bank to meet your demands."

A short, bitter laugh broke from the planter's lips.

"The grace is binding only on members of this club. When I leave this house to night, I leave behind me my resignation, and will no longer be bound by its rules. The instant the doors of the bank open in the morning, this check will be presented for payment—unless you agree to my terms."

"This is shameful!" cried Barron, no longer able to restrain his indignation at the devilish malignity displayed by Arnold. "Here is the money, Laurent. Lift that check, and then kick the cowardly cur out of the club!"

"I refuse it," coldly returned Arnold. "This

check tells the bank to pay me, and pay it shall—or dishonor the man who drew and signed the draft."

"I will see the cashier this very night, and give him the money to pay it with! Anything to foil a blackguard—"

"I will call on you to make your words good, Mr. Barron, or wipe them out with your life, as soon as my other engagements will admit."

"And I'll cowhide you for a low scoundrel, if you dare insult me by sending a challenge!" undauntedly cried the fat little fellow, swelling up like a turkey cock.

His indignation was genuine, and so was his courage, as all then present well knew, but there was such a startling contrast between the two, that the idea of his attempting to cowhide a man of Arnold's strength and powers, was so supremely ridiculous, that a low laugh followed, and all concerned felt a certain degree of relief for it.

The fierce light in his eyes belied the cold and sneering smile with which Frank Arnold glanced slowly over the company before speaking:

"Are there no other valorous gentlemen present who would like to show their courage by challenging one who is already engaged two deep with mortal enemies? Don't be bashful! You may never have another chance to gain so much glory at so slight a risk!"

There was no answer. Barron seemed crushed by the cutting taunt, in which there was something of justice. And, with a short, hard laugh, Arnold turned once more to his rival.

"You know now precisely how I mean to act in case you reject the chance which I intend offering for your consideration. On the contrary, accept, and my first act will be to destroy this superfluous check before your own eyes, and that, whether you win or lose in the end, will save your name from even the suspicion of dishonor."

Harold Laurent hesitated. He knew that Arnold hated him too bitterly to make this offer without having his price; but could the situation be any worse? All that he had said about the check, was perfectly true, though in his excitement he had overlooked the facts while wagering his plantation. True, with the customary three days' grace, he could easily raise the requisite sum, ten times over, with only his bare word for security, but he knew only too well that Arnold would not wait a single instant longer than he was compelled to do, before presenting the checks. He knew that the unvarying rule of the bank was to permit no customer, no matter how rich or influential he might be, to overdraw his credit a single penny. They would decline cashing the check, and then Arnold would post him as a swindler. Of course few would believe this who knew them both, but there would be a thousand disagreeable explanations to make.

"If a gentleman can accept any proviso emanating from your lips, without dishonor, I will agree; but I am to remain the judge. With this understanding, I will listen to what you may have to offer," said Laurent, coldly.

"I will stake all my winnings of to-night, on a single game, or rubber, just as you prefer, against your life."

"Pray, speak plainer. I'm not quite sure I comprehend."

"If you lose, you will stand up on one side of this table with me directly opposite, and give me one shot at your heart. If you win, you are again a rich man, and can challenge me to meet you when and where you will. Is that plain?"

For a brief space Harold Laurent remained silent, deeply thinking, carefully weighing the startling proposition. Then, his eyes glowing vividly, he made reply:

"I accept your offer—on one condition!"

CHAPTER X.

CLAIMING HIS POUND OF FLESH.

It was now Frank Arnold's turn to hesitate, but this, too, was of very brief duration. Across his active brain in swift review swept all the facts, and he believed that no promise he might give would make his case any the worse.

"I accept that proviso, even before you give it utterance, Mr. Laurent. May I ask its purport?"

"That if I win in the game you propose, you will play me another, for the stakes which I may name."

A low, mocking laugh greeted this announcement.

"I am perfectly safe in accepting, because I know that you will never have the power to enforce a compliance. If we play, I will surely win, and I shall just as certainly exact the penalty."

"If that thought consoles you, cling to it. But the devil does not always serve his favorites, and this occasion may prove one of the exceptions," coolly retorted Laurent. "But a truce to compliments. Do you accept my condition?"

"With all the pleasure in life!"

"Then I will name the stakes beforehand, that there may be no possible room for doubt. If I win the first game, I will play you another,

my life against yours. The loser to stand a shot from the winner, under the precise conditions named by you but a moment ago. Is that sufficiently clear?"

"Perfectly so—and I accept as plainly."

"Gentlemen, I call on you to assist me in restraining these madmen!" cried Barron, in strong agitation. "This is nothing short of murder, and we will be equally culpable if we permit this horrible affair to go any further—"

His white face now flushed hotly, Harold Laurent rose to his feet, his strong hands closing on the back of his chair.

"You forget yourself, Mr. Barron—keep your distance, gentlemen, or, by the Lord that made me! some of your number will need the surgeon's care before all ends!"

There was danger in his attitude, his fiery glare, and as Frank Arnold imitated his actions, the party faltered and hung back. Even Barron seemed daunted.

"The time for interference has gone by, long ago," continued Laurent, more calmly, but none the less resolute. "Since matters have gone so far, either Mr. Arnold or myself can quit this room only as a corpse. If you fear disgrace falling on the club, in consequence, how much better will be a free fight, such as any interference on your part will certainly precipitate? For I give you all free warning that unless you keep apart and suffer us to settle our difficulty after our own fashion, I will fight you until I die—and strike every blow to kill or maim!"

"And I will second his efforts, to the best of my ability," quietly added Arnold.

"Then I wash my hands of the whole affair! Gentlemen, I have the honor to bid you good-night!" said Barron, bowing low and strutting toward the door with all the dignity which his stumpy little figure could command.

Active as a cat, Laurent reached the barrier first, and turning the key in the lock, slipped it into his pocket.

"Begging your pardon, Mr. Barron, and first assuring you that I mean not the slightest disrespect, I must decline to suffer any person to leave this room until all is settled."

"What do you mean, sir? How dare you—"

"Simply that I do not care to run the risk of being interrupted by the police. The time for idle ceremony has gone by. You are so thoroughly angry and disgusted with us both, that you would tell all to the first officer you could find. An arrest would only postpone, not prevent a decision. Mr. Arnold kills me, or I will kill him. There is no alternative. Nothing short of a thunderbolt from heaven can prevent. You have done all in your power. Whatever happens, your skirts are clear. Then why prolong a scene which must be painful to all who are forced to witness it?"

"As for you, gentlemen, one word. You have our weapons. Either return them, or swear that you will give a pistol to the man who wins the right to use it. If not—if you refuse both propositions—then I will take my own, or kill the man who attempts to keep it from me. Your decision, please!"

With grave looks the gentlemen drew apart from the rivals, and consulted together in whispers.

A duel of this sort would prove a heavy blow to the club which was so dear to them all, but a free fight, such as had been threatened, would inflict still more disgrace. And that would be incurred without producing any good. These two men would never rest until they had fought, to the death. If overpowered and placed under arrest, they would quickly procure a bail, and carry out their bloodthirsty intentions all the more surely.

All in all, it was an ugly, uncomfortable situation, but they made the best of it, and with a cold bow, Barron placed the confiscated weapons upon the table, then retired to the further end of the room, with his face to the wall. The honest fellow was determined not to countenance the tragedy, even so far as looking on.

The rivals put away their weapons, then Arnold spoke:

"Let us get down to business, before another squabble arises. Name your choice of games; my challenge included that privilege, as you may remember."

"Thank you. I have a good memory. As there is only the one stake on each side, without the power to raise, it would be dry and unsatisfactory work to play poker. For that reason I prefer seven-up, best two out of three. It will be a better test of pure skill and nerve, besides giving less chance for cunning manipulation of the cards."

An evil light came into the dark eyes, and Arnold asked:

"Do you mean to insinuate that I have played foully?"

"No, for I know to the contrary," was the cool response, as Laurent deftly shuffled the cards. "I watched you too closely for that, and had I made any such discovery you would not be sitting there now. Still, with such big stakes in the balance, you might feel tempted to aid fortune a little."

"As you are doing now—trying to rattle me!" laughed Arnold, his composure instantly

returning as he believed he detected his antagonist's purpose in talking after such an insulting fashion. "Pray, keep it up if it pleases your fancy. When I talk it will be to the point."

"If the warning was unnecessary I have wasted my breath. I was simply trying to guard against the game's breaking up in a row, for then we would have all this trouble over again."

The cards were cut, and Laurent won the deal. The cards ran poorly, but fortune seemed pretty evenly divided between the two, the first game being tied at six each, when Laurent showed the ace of trumps and went out.

The second game was but a repetition of the first, with the exception of being won by Arnold, with a couple of points to spare. And then the third and deciding game was begun.

By this time the excitement of the spectators was intense, though kept well under guard, and even Barron, forgetting his indignation, had left his position facing the wall, and was now in the first circle, his eyes protruding, his usually florid countenance pale as death, as he watched the fall of the cards which were to pronounce the sentence of certain death for one or the other of the rivals.

They, never more cool and deliberate, to all appearance the least interested of all there congregated, played in perfect silence, save when the rules of the game called on them to speak, and then never an unnecessary word. Both faces were pale, but that was their natural hue, and a stranger dropping into the room would never have suspected that they were playing for life or death.

Whatever their faults, lack of courage could not be numbered among them. Let it be placed to their credit.

At last the critical stage of the game was reached. Each player stood five points—seven being the game.

It was Laurent's deal, and that hand must decide all.

Dealing three cards alternately, until each had six, he turned the trump—a small diamond. He cast a swift glance at the face of his cards, then closed them, and looked toward Frank Arnold, whose dark eyes were scanning his hand, holding it in such a manner that not one of those standing behind and to either side of his chair could obtain the slightest view of the value of the cards.

Being Laurent's deal, it was his adversary's option to either stand his hand, or beg. In the former case, the cards were to be played without any further preliminaries; in the latter, Laurent was to decide whether he would give him one point and play, or refuse, and deal off three more cards each.

"Beg!" said Arnold, quietly.

Laurent leaned back in his chair, and slowly ran over his cards. He held a good hand, and with anything like ordinary stakes depending, he would not have hesitated for a moment in giving his antagonist the one point.

He held the king of diamonds, the deuce of the same suit, with three other cards of one suit, and the last of a third.

None of these four cards were sure of a point, were he to run for another trump, while, should a heart come up, he would have nothing save what chance might give him in those extra three cards. On the other hand, he was sure of counting low with his deuce of diamonds, while there was but one chance in the entire deck for Arnold to beat his high card.

To those who may chance not to be perfectly posted on the rules which govern the game in question, it may not come amiss to add that at seven-up, the points have precedence in counting-out, as named: high, low, jack, game, save when jack forms the deck-head, when it counts the dealer as soon as turned up; while a point given to the beggar also counts at once.

Swiftly Laurent calculated his chances. With such a hand it would be suicidal to run the cards. There was only one card in the entire deck which could defeat him, and it was hardly reasonable to believe that, holding high, Arnold would beg, and take the chances of having the cards run.

"Play!" he said, leaning forward once more.

"I hardly think it is necessary," said Arnold, the evil light deepening in his eyes, as he spread his hand upon the table, in full view of all. "High puts me out, I believe."

It was only too true! The devil had not failed him, even in that emergency. His hand contained only the one trump, but it was enough to make all the difference between life and death to the man who sat gazing upon the fatal card as though suddenly turned to stone.

The hand was a peculiar one, and could scarcely have been improved had Arnold selected it from the entire deck, before seeing the trump turned. The ace of diamonds, ace and tray hearts, ace of spades, king and deuce of clubs. In each suit he held a certain point.

Two of these he held an additional card which could only be beaten by one other in the entire deck. If given a point, on begging, he would be out on high. If the cards were run, no matter what trump was turned, he would be certain of one point.

All this those who stared at the cards saw at

a glance, and with the triumphant words with which Arnold faced them, that oppressive spell was broken.

Pale, trembling, his face ghastly, Barron spoke, his voice scarcely intelligible through his suffocating emotion:

"Gentlemen—I beg of you—it must not be—"

Then all the suppressed devils in Arnold's bosom broke through the crust, and with a cocked revolver covering the little man, he snarled:

"One word more in that strain, Fred Barron, and I'll bore your brain with a bullet! Interfere further, if you dare!"

These hot words broke the benumbing spell which had fallen upon Harold Laurent for the moment, and he was once more himself, cold and composed, but all the more dangerous from that very calmness as he faced the party, pistols in hand, his voice ringing out sharply:

"Keep your distance, gentlemen, on peril of your lives! I entered this game with my eyes open, fully realizing the consequences, fully determined to pay the penalty if I lost, even as I resolved to make Mr. Arnold play a second rubber, his life against mine, if I won. I lost—and that settles it! Take your shot, Mr. Arnold!"

"It is murder!" gasped Barron, almost suffocating. "I will not allow it—I'll fight you both, single-handed—"

"You will do no such thing, Mr. Barron!" sharply cried Laurent, his cheek flushing hotly. "When I play, I expect to pay my debts of honor."

"And I mean to claim all I win!" cried Arnold, savagely.

"You would be more fool than knave if you did not," retorted Laurent, laying his pistols on the table between them, and picking up the fatal ace of diamonds. "I will give you a fair target to aim at, as well as a pleasant souvenir to remind you of this little tilt at cards."

As he spoke, Harold Laurent, buttoning his coat tightly around his superb figure, thrust a pin through the upper portion of the card, and fastened it to his left breast, with the scarlet pip directly above his quietly-throbbing heart.

"You can scarcely make a blunder, now, with that ace to guide your aim. I am ready—fire!"

Before another word could be uttered—before a hand could be lifted to check the terrible deed, Frank Arnold raised his revolver and fired at the ace of diamonds!

Directly in the center struck the bullet, and like magic it was instantly surrounded by blood-stains!

CHAPTER XI.

ONE TRAGEDY BREEDS ANOTHER.

AND this is the story to which Dan Abbles listened on that late summer's night, in the solitary cabin just without the confines of Tombstone, two and twenty years after the happening of the events then detailed—listened with an interest such as only a gambler could feel, one who had, in his time, played many a desperate game, for many a curious stake.

And Carl Sherwood? Partially under the influence of the brandy which he had swallowed so freely, he told the wild, horrible, yet strangely-fascinating story, without forgetting or holding in reserve a single detail, drawing the rapidly-shifting scenes without softening one part or unduly shading the other, his voice varying with the incidents, his face and his hands illustrating the tragedy as he went on to the end.

But when he spoke those words—when he told how proudly defiant Harold Laurent stood before him, ace of diamonds pinned above his heart, looking him full in the eye without the slightest tremor in face, voice or figure, while pronouncing his own death-doom—then the overstrained nerves gave way, and the mechanical voice faltered, grew husky and faint.

"I saw the scarlet spot for just a moment, as my sights covered its center, not six feet away. I fired—and even through the smoke I saw that my bullet had cut the exact center of the spot. I saw the red blood start out all around the bullet-hole—yet he did not fall, did not even shiver, for a moment that seemed a life-long! Then he spoke—and those words have haunted me ever since. Only four—'Myrtle—wife—God pity.' Then he fell forward across the table, dead."

Scarcely distinguishable were the last words, and as he uttered them Carl Sherwood, with a shudder, covered his eyes with his hands, as though to shut out some frightful vision.

"I wish I'd 'a' bin thar!" muttered Abbles, his eyes all aglow with excitement. "I never see a game fer stakes like *them*, much less played one. I never envied ye afore as I do now, pard, Lord o' love! jest think! What yarns ye can spin to your kids when you git old an' gray an' settle down in comfort!—an' the hull on 'em true, to make it more bindin'! I'd give the best year o' my hull life fer jest one game like that to look back to!"

Carl Sherwood uncovered his face, his face pale and haggard, his eyes hollow and blood-shot.

"And I—I would give twenty years of my life if all this had never happened—or happened

to some other besides myself. I have not known a day or night of perfect rest or content since that shot was fired through that cursed ace of diamonds. A thousand times I have caught myself pinning the infernal card over my own heart—and more than once have I awakened from sleep to find myself with the card over my heart, revolver in my hand, sighting at the red spot as it was reflected from a mirror before which I stood."

Pouring out a glass of brandy, Carl Sherwood drank it down at a gulp, then bent further over the rude table, his eyes like twin coals of fire, his voice strained and unnatural.

"Some day I will awaken too late—some day it will be the report of my own pistol that will break the horrid spell—and if only the shot speeds true to my sleeping aim—"

"Why, the lookin' glass 'll git bu'sted all to thunder, in course!" bluntly interrupted Abbles, with a short laugh, but not without a new and startling suspicion entering his slow but retentive brain.

Was his old mate going crazy? If not, what did this wild nonsense portend? Simple drunkenness? Hardly that, for he had seen Sherwood drunk more than once ere this.

Sherwood stared into his face for a moment, then shook his head, impatiently.

"You fail to comprehend me—your brain is too thick, too sluggish. I tell you I have seen it as I awoke, all of a tremble. A card on my breast—another one on the breast of the spirit in the glass."

"An' I say it's all durn foolishness!" doggedly interposed Dan. "You've tuck too much speret in a glass to-night fer your own good. It's the snakes you'll begin to see, fust thing. Look here—straight in my eye. S'pose you did shoot? S'pose you saw your shadder in the glass, with a keerd on its buzzum, an' it a-squintin' at ye over a pistil, jest as you was doin' to it—what hurt could it do to *you*? It mought be monstrous on healthy fer the glass, but do you reckon it could shoot back? Do you argie that the bullet from your pistil'd bounce back—git out! you make me sick!"

Abbles started to reason his mate out of his folly, but his tones of deliberate argument changed to those of utter disgust, ending in an explosive snort. Either this produced the effect aimed at, or else the brief hallucination died a natural death, for with a start, Sherwood straightened up in his seat, passing one hand swiftly across his brow. And when his hand was lowered, that insane light had fled from his eyes.

"It's you, Dan? I've been dreaming—I remember, now! You said something about wishing you had been in my shoes, that night—didn't you?"

"You ain't fur out—I *do* wish it," slowly replied his mate, keenly, though covertly eying Sherwood, still in doubt as to his perfect sanity. "I never yit played a game with sech tall stakes as *them* onto the board, but I *will* ef the Lord lets me live long enough to hunt up a man that wouldn't be too bad skeered at the idee to set his life ag'inst the turn of a keerd—the idee hes struck in mighty deep, an' thar's only the one way fer to git shet of it," he added, in perfect soberness.

"And find yourself haunted forever after, as I have—"

"Durned ef I kin see the rights o' *that*, no-how! Wasn't it a fa'r game? You didn't cheat? An' ef he'd 'a' bin the man to win the shot, wouldn't he 'a' tuck it quick enough?"

"You don't just understand what I mean, Dan. I'm not regretting the killing of Harold Laurent, so far as that alone is concerned. I hated him far too intensely for that—I hate him even more now, because of all that he made me suffer after he was dead and buried."

"Mebbe I'm a fool, but I ain't durned fool enough to swaller none o' that bloody spook business," said Dan, with a grim shake of the head. "I looks at it in this way: ef the devil ever gits a fa'r grip onto a dead coon, he's got better use fer him then to let him turn tramp ag'in in these regions, jest fer to bother them as may hev got the better o' him in the game up here. An' ef a critter dies or gits wiped out, an' goes up to the other place, he'll be too chuck-up satisfied for to ever want to git away, ef he could, even fer a night. Them's *my* senterments!"

Sherwood made an impatient gesture, but abandoned that portion of the subject, as profitless to pursue further. It would take too much argument to cause Dan Abbles to see with his eyes, now that he had taken a positive opinion into his stubborn, thick-witted brain.

"Let me finish my story. Then you will better understand my feeling on this point."

As Harold Laurent fell across the table there was a cry of horror and rage from the gentlemen present, and as they rushed forward I leaped back, a pistol in each hand, for my first thought was that they intended to avenge his death by mobbing me. But I was wrong in that, for they did not appear to notice me in the least, but gathered around him, and tried to restore him to consciousness.

"Of course they failed. He had pinned the card fairly above his heart, and I sent my bullet home too truly for there to be any hopes of

his escaping with life. I doubt whether he ever knew that the lead struck him, even though those four words broke from his lips before the blood welled forth.

"Then Barron turned upon me, his voice shaking like a leaf, though not with fear—I'll give him so much credit, for though I was then but little better than a madman, and had him covered with the same weapon that had sent Harold Laurent to his last account—he never flinched an atom.

"He shook his fat little fist in my face, and bade me save my worthless life by speedy flight. If I was to be found in the city by daylight, he would have me arrested on the charge of murder—and when I was convicted, he would offer half his fortune for the privilege of acting as hangman.

"We used to make lots of fun of the pompous little fellow, but I don't believe any who saw and heard him on that night, could ever find it in their heart to do so again. I know that it sobered me—changed me from a madman, into my usual self, cool and steel-nerved.

"I laughed in his face. I defied either him or any one then present, to come forward and make oath that murder had been done, that there was anything unfair or illegal throughout the entire affair. I can recall my exact words, just as I remember every word spoken that night, every action performed, no matter how trifling it seems, by either Harold Laurent or myself.

"Gentlemen," I said. "I am not ashamed of what I have done this night. If it was all to do over again, my course of action would be precisely the same. I defy you to charge me with murder. I will not flee from Orleans like a criminal. You know my address. If there is any doubt, there is my card. I will remain at home all of to-morrow and next day, to give you ample time to make up your minds what to do. Now, I claim the remainder of the stakes for which Mr. Laurent and I played, with the single exception of the check which overdrew his account at the bank. That you can preserve or destroy at your pleasure."

"I tossed the check aside and then filled my pockets with the rest—some of the bank-notes being wet with the blood from his veins, before they took him from the table. I remember that I laughed a little as I looked at the stains which they left upon my fingers.

"I turned to them, once more, and bade them take the key of the door from the dead man's pocket, and open the way, unless they preferred that I should do it myself.

"Barron muttered something about sacrilege, and hastened to get the key. He unlocked and flung the door open. I bowed to them, with a mocking smile, and then backed through the door-way, my pistols all ready for use, for even then I could hardly believe that they would permit me to escape without an attempt to arrest me, but my cool audacity carried me through.

"I went direct to my rooms and locked myself in. I can remember knocking off the neck of a bottle of brandy, and swallowing the contents at a draught—but that is all. I must have lain down on the bed, for there my body servant, a faithful mulatto, in whose veins, report said, coursed the same proud blood with which my own was filled, found me the next afternoon, when he finally mustered courage enough to burst my door open, half distracted by the terrible tales concerning my doings, with which the entire city was ringing.

"He managed to restore me to consciousness, after a time, and then begged me to flee for my life—that there was angry talk of a mob and a lynching, in which I was to play a prominent part.

"This was just the sort of tonic I needed most, and all the devil in me came to the top, ready and eager for action.

"I changed my dress, had him bring me something to eat and drink, then looked to my weapons and left the house just as night fell. Not to run away. I would not have taken a step toward that end, though I knew that my remaining in town meant certain death. It was not so much courage, as desperation, though. That statement of his—that Myrtle Ayres was and had been his wife for three months past—was ringing in my ears all the time, and I could not doubt its truth, after those words which dropped from his lips even as death froze them. Though I had won, I was still the loser. In my madness, I had fancied that, with Harold Laurent ruined and out of the country, I could teach her to forget him—to love me in time—but that was all at an end now. Instead of loving, she would hate and curse me, as only a bereaved wife can hate and curse. Even as I walked, outwardly cool and careless, through the lighted streets, into the gay saloons where men stared at me as though I was a monster just escaped from some menagerie, and shrinking away much the same, too—I could see and hear her. It was a foretaste of hell on earth, and I passed from one place to another, hoping that my enemies would find the courage to attack me—fairly longing for the threatened mob to show itself, and give me a chance of hiding that haunting vision in a cloud of smoke and a stream of hot blood!

"But I had my trouble for my pains. No mob arose. Those to whom I spoke, answered civilly, even as they made their escape from my proximity as rapidly as possible, without giving me cause for picking a quarrel on that score.

"Only for my thoughts of her, I might have enjoyed the sensation I was creating. It was something new to have an entire city full of people afraid of one—to know that of them all, not a man dared cross one's path!

"I returned to my rooms, and to shut out her face, I drugged myself to unconsciousness with brandy, then lay down to sleep, while poor Tom kept guard at the door with a shot-gun.

"On the next day, I sent him out to learn the news. He returned with more than I expected. The story was all over town, how the tidings had been broken to her—how she fell down in a deathlike swoon, after calling Harold Laurent her husband—how her father heard those words, and after sending a score of servants for the doctors, and getting her to bed, he stormed at and cross-questioned Fidele, her quadroom waiting maid, until he learned the whole truth—that his idolized daughter had indeed married Harold Laurent, not only without his consent, but against his positive commands.

"He waited until the doctors came, and reported that the young lady was doing as well as could be expected, but that, without the tenderest care and best of nursing, a severe attack of brain fever would probably ensue, from which she could hardly expect to escape with both life and reason.

"They say that the old gentleman uttered two names, coupling both with a curse—first that of Harold Laurent, then my name—as he started for the stables, calling for a horse.

"He never reached them. Before he had left the house a score yards behind him, he flung up his arms and fell heavily forward upon his face. When the doctors reached him, he was past their aid. Heart disease, they said. Maybe so, but I have often caught myself wishing that my name had not been last on his lips!

"But there was still more to tell, as a glance at the faded face of poor Tom told me plainer than words, and I bade him complete the dose at one giving.

"The report that both Myrtle and her father had fallen dead on hearing of the affair at the club rooms, spread like wildfire; and the neighbors rose in a fury which, though short-lived, lasted long enough to destroy all on my plantation that willing hands, aided by fire, could demolish. All, even to the slaves' quarters, went up in smoke!

"However much this might have affected me under any other circumstances, I hardly heard the words that Tom managed to utter, though it all came back to me afterward. I only knew that her life or reason was said to be in danger, owing to my work, and then I believe I felt the first pangs of genuine remorse.

"I sent Tom away to learn what he could, bidding him bring me positive news of her, under penalty of having his brains blown out. He saw that I was making no idle threat, and he left me to do his best—poor devil! The curse was on him too, for his fidelity to me caused his death!

"It was not until years afterward that I learned all that happened—how, in striving to gain the information I desired, he was discovered by some of the slaves belonging to the Ayres plantation, and by them pounded to death with clubs, because he was true to me—because he had served me faithfully through evil report as well as good.

"It was the next day, when I was lying on the bed in my room impatiently waiting for Tom to return and report, that a soft rap sounded at my door. I never doubted—never thought—of its being any other than Tom, and hastened to turn the key. The door was flung open in my face, and there—*not* Tom, but Myrtle—the widow of Harold Laurent.

"I staggered back to the bed, unable to utter a word. I remember my first thought was that she had died, and was come to curse me for murdering her young life, even as I had murdered her husband. Because she was so pale, so ghastly, so worn and unlike the fresh, rosy woman whom I had always known her, no doubt. And even when she spoke, I still believed it a vision from beyond the grave—that voice had changed so completely, so terribly! The words? I can repeat them if you care to listen—no danger of my ever forgetting them, this side of the grave!—and Carl Sherwood brushed a hand swiftly across his brow, then tossed his head with a short, strained laugh, as he turned out more brandy.

"Cussed you a bit, I reckon?" grunted Dan, with a yawn, as though he failed to find this portion of the tragic history nearly as interesting as that which was enlivened by the cards. "Wimmen is that-a-way. Let 'em hav thar say out, an' the danger'll go off with the steam. But clap the stopper on, an' you want to look out fer a busted boiler—*sure*!"

With a short, hard laugh, Carl Sherwood drew a knife, and with the keen point slit open his shirt bosom on the left side, laying bare his skin, touching in succession three small,

whitish, slightly sunken spots, close enough together to be covered with a playing card.

"She was an exception to your rule, old fellow! I said not a word to interrupt her, for I was literally paralyzed for the time being. She poured out the vials of her wrath upon my head—never mind just what she said; you can guess sufficiently close to the truth for all purposes—and then I caught a glimpse of a pistol in her hand. That was all. Her first bullet struck me, and I knew nothing more, though she must have fired at least three shots, since I bear that many scars, as you can see.

"The next I remember was awaking to a dreamy sort of consciousness in a hospital, and hearing two men talking over me. It seemed like a dream, for I could not stir hand nor foot, nor even open my eyes to see who the talkers were.

"No doubt they believed me sleeping, or I might not have learned as much. They mentioned a name—that of Myrtle Ayres—in connection with a body which had just been carried to the morgue. They said that there was no doubt as to its identity, and at last the mystery of her long disappearance after shooting me was made clear.

"A pity she did not make cleaner work of the job! I heard one of the voices add, as there came a slight jar, as if he had spitefully kicked the cot on which I lay. 'To think that the infernal, cold-blooded villain is in a fair way to recover, after doing all this damage! Every time I think of it, I am tempted to throw down my instruments, and take a solemn oath to never again undertake another case!'

"But think!" said another voice. "What an extraordinary case! Either one of those bullets should have caused instant death—one at least must have grazed the heart itself! And—curse the man, with all my heart, if you like, but—think of the reputation which we will gain by bringing him through!"

"If they said anything more, I never heard it. I was only conscious of one fact: that Myrtle was dead, lying in the horrible morgue, awaiting identification by her friends.

"The next I remember with any distinctness, is being at the morgue, my face and person closely muffled up, looking down upon her face—what the fishes had left unmarred. I saw enough—too much—and turning, I fled.

"It was Fall when all this occurred. It was Spring when I came back to my senses, hale and hearty in body, but an infant in mind, out in California, working in the mines. I never knew how I escaped from the hospital, or from the city, or how I recovered from those terrible wounds and drifted to California. I do not know to this day.

"Slowly the past came back to me, and then went to Orleans. I had changed much in appearance, and this change I lightened by a slight disguise, so I had little fear of being recognized.

"Without exciting suspicion, I managed to learn all that I cared to know. Soon after Myrtle Ayres was taken home, after shooting me, she had disappeared again, only to be found at the morgue, taken home and buried beside her father and mother. I visited the grave. It bore his name, too—they had buried husband and wife together.

"I found that there had been no charge laid against me. All was attributed to a duel, born of a game of cards, and I knew that I might throw aside my disguise, and claim my own.

"I did so. There was some trouble in proving my identity but in the end I won. I claimed and received the money which the authorities found in my room when I was taken to the hospital. I sold my plantation and slaves—neither brought anything like their former value, for the war was just begun; but I cared little for that. I entered the army, but did not remain long. My story was common property, and very few of the officers would associate with me. I fought half a dozen duels without getting a scratch, my old luck standing by me through all, but at last I resigned. I could not fight against the entire army.

"I drifted out West, and then came a long streak of ill luck that left me without a dollar, without a change of clothing to my back, or a morsel of food to put into my stomach.

"Then it was that I first met you—you remember?"

"When I give you the stake that ended in bustin' the baro-bank—biggest one in all 'Frisco! When you 'vided with me, 'onest, an' I tackled you fer the rest? An' you cleaned me out, slick as a whistle? Waal I should remark!" enthusiastically commented Dan Abble.

"We swore mateship then, and have been such ever since. We had our little downs and ups, like all of our profession, but we managed to keep a little ahead of the game, until now.

"Dan, old fellow, you'd better pull out. There's a big streak of black bad luck coming for me, and if you stay in the game you'll suffer, too. Better pull out, old man."

"Ef I do, I do, but ef I do I'll be durned ef I do—an' thar ye got it, chuck up!" declared Dan, with more earnestness than perspicuousness, bringing his clinched fist down on the table with a thump that caused the bottles and glasses to

dance a fantastic jig. "Whar's the bad luck a-comin' from? Not that white-headed cuss with the boy's face? You don't mean him?"

"From him or from that woman—perhaps both," moodily muttered the gambler. "You saw him show that card? It was the very ace of diamonds through which I bored Harold Laurent's heart! Where did he get it? How came he to play it to-night, and against me, of all men? Who is he—the devil or a ghost?"

"You're dead sure it ain't that same feller—the one you stuck fer all he was wuth? Mebbe he wasn't killed. Mebbe he's bin layin' fer ye all this time, an's jest got a good ready fer to pay ye back in the same coin—"

Carl Sherwood flung out his hand with an impatient gesture. And his voice was more natural as he exclaimed:

"Don't be a fool, man! This fellow no more resembles Harold Laurent than he does you!"

"That settles one pint, then," sagaciously nodded Dan, not a whit disconcerted by that sharp speech. "Ef he ain't a mite like the critter you killed, then it stan's to sober reason that he can't be his ghost—which is a comfort not to be sneezed at, sense you 'pear to b'lieve in sech durn stuff!"

Carl Sherwood did not appear to have heard him. He was staring moodily at the empty glass which he still held in his hand, and though he spoke again, it was quite as much to himself as for the benefit of his mate.

"I've been haunted in dreams, ever since those black days, but never before while awake. If not Harold Laurent, or the devil, who is he? What is his game? What does he know—"

His mutterings ceased abruptly, and he was once more the man of action, as a strange sound came to their ears from outside, from the rear of the little cabin.

CHAPTER XII.

PETER POPGUN'S LAMENT.

A CURIOUS sound, whether produced by man or animal. If the former, then he must be in woeful distress; for, mingling with the explosive, retching sounds, could be distinguished hollow groans and lamentable sighs.

For one instant Carl Sherwood remained crouched beside the table, like a panther, his eyes glittering, his white teeth exposed as his thin lips curled back. Then, low and hissing, he addressed his comrade:

"Some one is playing the spy—out and take him!"

Dan Abbles drew his pistol, and there was an ugly look in his sleepy eyes as he stole toward the door, that spoke plainer than the loudest threats. Swift and light-footed as a cat, Sherwood gained his side ere his hand fell upon the bar with which the door was secured, and his steel grip lent emphasis to the warning he breathed in Abbles' ear:

"Not a shot or a blow, unless it prove absolutely necessary in self-defense—but take him prisoner if you can!"

Noiselessly the bar was removed and the heavy door opened just sufficiently to permit their passage. Sherwood motioned Abbles to turn to the left, while he darted around the opposite corner drawing a revolver as he ran.

His keen eyes were scanning the rocky, broken ground beyond, in case the eavesdropper had taken the alarm from the abrupt cessation of conversation within the cabin, and sought safety in flight, but naught rewarded his eager gaze until he turned the second corner of the hut, just as Dan Abbles made his appearance from the opposite direction.

Midway between them, with his back against the cabin wall, they distinguished the doubled-up figure of a man, from whom those doleful sounds proceeded, now with redoubled force.

"Throw up your hands, stranger!" cried Sherwood, sharply, enforcing the command with a leveled pistol.

"I'm throwing up—my boots—oh—a-agh-h!" groaned the poor wretch, doubling up until it seemed as though he would pitch forward upon his face, while a fearful stench filled the surrounding atmosphere.

"Way, too ripe hen fruit!" exploded Abbles, grasping his nose with the fingers of one hand, while the other kept the unknown covered with a revolver. "Ef we don't all hev the cholery infantum 'fore mornin', 'tain't his fault! Look out, boss! to ch him lightly, or the rotten critter'll bust!"

Unheeding this cry, Carl Sherwood leaped forward and grasped the groaning, vomiting wretch by the shoulder, thrusting the muzzle of his pistol against his temple, as he cried:

"Lift a finger, or try to break away, and I'll scatter your brains all over a quarter-section, Peter Papagon!"

"Blow an' be durned—I don't keer!" gasped the poor devil, offering not the faintest resistance, his powerful form limp as a wet rag, all unnerved by the violence of the last paroxysm. "But ye can't do it! I hain't got brains enough left to spatter a copper cent—oh—ah! hang onto my boots, or up they come! New York-r-ik! Didn't I tell ye so—good Lawd!"

The spasm passed, and his form collapsed.

Weak and quivering, he hung a dead weight upon the gambler's hands.

"Bear a hand, Dan!" sharply cried Sherwood. "Let's get him inside, and pour a dose of brandy down his throat, before he turns wrong side out. Confound your nose, man! Take hold!"

Dan Abbles obeyed, though with undisguised reluctance. Dull of wit, until the truth had been literally hammered into his thick skull, he saw only a drunken man in this wretched being, and could divine no reason why their little cabin should be defiled by his presence.

Together they bore the heavy weight into the cabin, where it was propped up on a chair. Pouring out a full glass of brandy, Sherwood forced Peter's head back and poured the powerful liquor down his throat. A gasping, gurgling spell followed, and anticipating the worst, Dan Abbles leaped back from in front; but the alarm was a false one. Either the poor devil had entirely relieved his stomach in that last spasm, or the brandy served to counteract the vile dose.

Carl Sherwood barred the door, and drawing a stool to the side of the slab table opposite where Peter Papagon sat, stared fixedly into the wretched woe-begone countenance of the giant. There was a peculiar magnetism in that steady stare, and Peter soon felt its influence. His huge form began to quiver and shrink away but his bloodshot eyes were irresistibly drawn toward those of the gambler.

"Your name is Peter Papagon, I believe?" said Sherwood, slowly, concentrating all his power into that steady gaze, resolved to destroy the influence of the Old Boy of Tombstone, if possible. "What brought you here? Whosent you?"

Even as he spoke, Sherwood saw that he was foiled. Though to all seeming Peter was no longer in that strange, trance-like state which he had exhibited while at the Bower, the magnetic fluid with which the Old Boy had impregnated his every fiber, was still too powerful for another to gain a like ascendancy. Or was it all a cunningly played farce? Were these two men working together for some secret end, which involved his life? Was Peter Papagon an ally, instead of a simple tool?

For his life, Carl Sherwood could not satisfactorily answer this unspoken question. He saw that while his own powers of concentration were steadily growing weaker, the giant was as surely throwing off the faint influence which he first felt, his countenance betraying a growing irritation instead.

"The devil—an' thar ye got it!" snorted the giant, bringing one huge fist down upon the table with force sufficient to have felled an ox. "I'm ha'nted—bewitched—rid by the Old Boy an' all his imps—that's what's the matter! Two weeks ago, what was I? A decent, 'spectable-actin' critter as ever walked on two legs. Not so smart an' high-larnt as some, mebbe, but fer all that a man what could look the world an' all the rest o' mankind in the face without a blush o' p'izen shame makin' him a heathen red-skin—what could meet a she-woman without tryin' to crawl down into the toes o' his boots, fer thinkin' o' the durn-fool tricks he'd bin playin' all over the kentry when the spooks was a-ridin' of him."

"That's what Peter Papagon was in them days—only two weeks ago; but what is he now? A mis'able wrack! A kickin' mule with his hind legs tuck off clean up! A shot-gun without lock, stock or bar! A penny-dip with the taller all burnt up, only the butt end o' the wick left—an' that stinkin' like fury! A mean, low-down critter what goes aroun' suckin' aigs! Swallerin' 'em with the hides on! An' pickin' out them what was laid by a monstrous on-heathy hen, a thousan' years ago, set onto by a dozen old maid hens ever sence!"

So woe-begone his countenance, so full of disgusted misery his voice, that despite themselves, Sherwood and Dan Abbles burst into a laugh that made the old cabin echo.

Peter eyed them in melancholy scorn.

"You kin laugh, fer it ain't you that's possessed. Mebbe I'd snicker, too, ef it was somebody else. Mebbe I could see the fun, then! Mebbe them aigs wouldn't smell quite so loud. Mebbe they wouldn't taste so powerful. But with that parfumery in my nostrils, that taste in my mouth, an' my throat raked an' scratched an' skinned 'long o' them p'izen shells a-comin' out crossways—kin I laugh? Kin I even snicker or pump up jest the shadder of a smile? Mebbe Peter could, in his best days, fer it tuck a mighty heap to oversot him, but I ain't Peter no longer. I'm—durned ef I know what! But I do know that I've bin chawin' up over ripe hen fruit, fer I see'd the hulls, an' I smelled the smell—I smell it yet! Good Lawd! To think! Me—Peter Papagon—suckin' aigs—agh!"

Doubling up with another spasm, Peter grasped the bottle and drowned the enemy with a mighty flood of brandy. Choking, coughing, he sunk back on his stool, the picture of misery.

Keenly Sherwood had watched the giant through his disjointed talk, trying his best to look below the surface and decide once for all whether the fellow was playing a part, or

simply acting out his real nature. It seemed real. If acting, then Peter Papagon was a superb artist in that particular line of comedy.

"Two weeks ago, you said, Peter, I believe. What set you to actin' like that at first? Got on a drunk, I suppose?"

"I never drank—that is, the old Peter didn't. It didn't 'gree with him. Made him monstrous sick. One nip o' licker'd throw him flat-ter'n ef a mule kicked him. He stuck to business, like a white man. Some folks called him a softy. Mebbe they was right; but they didn't find him so mighty soft the day he ketched 'em tormentin' a John. Thar was six of the toughs onto the Chinees, but when Peter got through, it looked like a dozen, they were sprawled around so loose and reckless. They tried cuttin' an' shootin' but Peter didn't. His fists an' hoofs was enough. They wasn't so soft; but that was the old Peter—not the aig-suckin' shadder."

"If not drink, then what was it?"

"You tell. I, ef it was me, never know'd nothin' 'bout it ontel they tole me of it, when it was all over. I thought they was foolin', an' I tried to prove that I was some's else, but I couldn't. It was all a mux. An' so it went on. I'd be at work in the shaft, the last I know'd, an' then, mebbe hours or a half day afterwards, I'd come to, feelin' weak an' played out as a sick kitten, mebbe home at my shanty, mebbe in some saloon, mebbe 'way out in the hills or sands."

"An' then some feller'd come in, or meet me es I was moggin' home, an' tell me what a bloody durn fool I'd bin makin' out o' myself. An' I couldn't prove it was a mistake. An' so it went on. When my brain was clear enough to think at all, I studied it over. I couldn't member nothin' I did when in those spells. I only knowed that I'd be plum' tired out when I come out of 'em. An' I finally come to the 'clusion that I was ha'nted or witch-rid."

"Then you cannot remember how you came out here behind this shanty? You don't remember what you overheard us talking about, before we came outside and captured you?"

"I don't know nothin'—cept those durned aigs!" and the giant's features suddenly contorted, and he clutched at his stomach with both huge hands. "But I ax one favor, mates. An' I ax it as near like a white man as I know how. Don't tell anybody how you found me, nur what I've bin doin'. I wouldn't mind ef it was only the boys to laugh at me. I could stan' that. But ef she ever got hold o' it, then I would give up!"

What little doubt remained in the gambler's mind was now dissipated. Peter Papagon might be a tool of the Old Boy of Tombstone, but he was no willing one—no cunning ally. No man could counterfeit the emotion with which those last words were uttered, or simulate that look of wretched anxiety.

"Look here, Peter," he said, with a certain degree of sympathy in his tones, but which was subordinate to a still more certain sternness. "This is a strange story which you have told us, and I am not quite certain that you are not playing a part in the interest of those who are my enemies. If you are really honest, and prove this to my satisfaction by answering frankly any questions which I may ask you, I pledge you my word as a gentleman that I will solve all these troublesome mysteries for you, and if you wish, help you to get even with the one who is at the bottom of all your wretchedness. Is it a bargain?"

Peter started from his stool with a look of eagerness in his face which was almost painful to witness, but then the gloomy shadow returned, and he fell back once more.

"You talk mighty kind, an' I give you credit fer meanin' what you say; but it ain't to be did. I know that. No man kin help me. The devil is in it. An' he'll keep on a-ridin' an' a-drivin' of me ontel I putt a bullet through the place whar my brains used to be."

"When he would have you, sure enough, not for spells, as now, but all the time through eternity, if what you think is true," sharply interposed Sherwood. "I tell you, Peter, I can serve you in this, if you will let me—if you will try to serve me in turn. Once more, and for the last time, is it a bargain between you and me?"

Peter thrust out his hand and grasped that of the gambler. A ray of light came into his haggard countenance.

"It can't make matters any worse—I promise."

"You shall never regret the act, Peter. Now tell me, who is this woman whom you are so afraid of offending?"

"Nancy Topack's her name, boss," and as he uttered it an honest flush came into the giant's face, a softened light into his eyes. "She runs a la'ndry in Tombstone. A little mite of a woman, but ef the good Lawd ever made a angel an' sot her down on this airth to wash an' iron out dirty clothes, then that angel's name is Nancy Topack!"

Dan Abbles snorted out loud, but Sherwood remained serious. Just then he could see nothing ridiculous in that speech. It was too sincere—too full of love that could perceive naught but perfection in the object of adoration. It

expressed love such as he had once felt, the memory of which was sharpened by the tragic tale he had told that night.

"You love her? And she? Does she smile or frown?"

"I love the ground she treads onto, an' even the water she throws away when her day's work is done, jest beca'se her han's hev tetch'd it! Mebbe you don't know how it is when a man is struck so hard. Mebbe you'll be all the happier ef you was never to find out. But that ain't what you axed me. Time was when Nancy liked me. She said that when we'd got enough saved up atween us to set up housekeepin' in a comfortable way, with a trifle to go on in case o' accidents, sech as *will* happen in the best o' families, she 'nd me'd pull out o' this heathen kentry an' strike a decent claim, whar they was churches an' schools an' dry-goods shops, an' all sich-like. An' then we'd git married."

"She was in airnest, too. I could tell that in her voice, softer'n common, an' with a tendersort o' purr into it, like a pet cat that's hed its supper, an' is jest droppin' asleep afore the fire. It showed in her eyes, too. They didn't snap an' sparkle, like they usally do. Yit they wa'n't dull an' sleepy, nuther. I don't mind jest the word that'd fit into it perfect. I'm sorter clumsy with my tongue, at the best. But I could see the pure happy stickin' out o' them black eyes, fur enough to hang a hat onto!"

Peter paused, with a low sigh and a melancholy shake of the head.

"That is bright enough prospect for anybody, Peter."

"Wasn't it? But that is gone, now, up the flume a-kinin'! Jest the t'other night, Nancy told me that ef I didn't settle down an' quit my p'izin monkey tricks, she'd sour onto me fer good an' all. She give me one more chainece—an' here I've knocked that west-end an'-crooked: fer what? Rotten aigs! Jest rotten aigs, an' the good Lawd only knows what more on-christianly devilment to back it up!"

"But she can't blame you. You told her that you were not accountable for your escapades!"

"Sartin—but that only made it all the wuss with Nancy. She said she 'lowed to marry a man, not a puppy-doll—whatever that means: durned ef I tell ye! She don't take no stock in sperets nor hoodoo business. She more'n hinted that I hed my two eyes onto some other wimmen, an' was tryin' to stall her off by playin' the fool. She said that she'd meet me more'n hafe way in that, ef I only owned up, or ef I was too mealy-mouthed fer that, jest to git on another tantrum like the rest, an' she'd take the hint without any kick."

"I talked an' coaxed an' reasoned, but it wasn't no use. When Nancy gits sot, she's sot fer good, an' giant powder can't budge her a inch!"

"I know from the way I feel—all limpsy an' onstrung in my narves—that I've bin on the rampage ag'in to night. An' that cooks my goose with Nancy!"

"Have you any idea who it is that plays these tricks on you, Peter?" slowly asked Sherwood, after a brief pause.

"The devil, I reckon; who else could do it?"

"Suppose it was a man? Suppose I could prove this to you, and tell you the man's name; what would you do?"

"Jest a common man? A mortal critter, like you an' me?"

"Not a common man, by any means, but quite as mortal as any one of us now present," with a soft smile.

"I'd bounce the p'izin critter the fust time I could find him. I'd take him right to whar Nancy was to work. I'd set him up afore her, an' make him 'fess the hull dirty business! An' then it'd be jest as Nancy said. Ef she sed I might lick the cuss I'd do it. Ef she shet her eyes an' said that she didn't reckon it'd be safe fer to let the critter run loose, I'd wind him up fer good an' all."

Sherwood laughed, with a trace of a sneer in his tones.

"Very wise and prudent, and showing how perfect is your faith in the charming Nancy, but a scheme that would hardly work so smoothly. The man I mean would hardly suffer you to have all the enjoyment. Before you could more than attempt his arrest I greatly fear that the doubt you recently expressed a bit ago as to the existence of any brains in your skull would be solved—though you would hardly be in a condition to realize that important fact."

Dan Abbles had listened to this conversation with a steadily-growing discontent, and now, with a mighty yawn, he rose from his stool and moved toward the bunk at the rear of the room, muttering:

"Ef you critters is goin' to drone away like that all the rest o' the night I don't want any more o' it! I'm goin' to take a snooze. Ef you need me, jest sing out."

Sherwood made no effort to interfere, and the burly gambler carried out his intention—at least, so far as lying down.

"Peter!"—and leaning across the table, with earnestness in his voice, and the lurid light deepening in his eyes, Carl Sherwood touched the giant on the arm. "Peter, promise me that

you will be guided by me in this affair. Promise that you will conceal the truth from even your Nancy until I give you leave to make all clear. Promise this, and I will point out the man who has so shamefully misused the powers nature gave him by making you the laughing stock of Tombstone. I will arm you so that you can foil him hereafter. I will make all smooth between you and Nancy. And when that day comes I will give her such a wedding present as will place her beyond the necessity of work for years to come, if she wishes."

"I promise—an' thar's the hand of the old Peter onto it, as nigh as I kin fetch him back ag'in!" exclaimed the giant, his face brightened, his eyes glowing.

"Good enough! You shall never find cause to regret having trusted me, Peter. Now listen."

Rapidly, yet clearly, Carl Sherwood detailed the scenes in which Peter Papagon had that night played a prominent part in the bar-room of Dianthe's Bower. Rage, shame and disgust chased each other in swift succession across the giant's face, and once more he clutched desperately at his disordered stomach as Sherwood told of that Arizona cocktail.

"He made me drink that? Rotten aig, shell an' all?"

"And you smacked your lips when he asked you what it tasted like, saying that it resembled butterflies soaked in honey. He made you hug and kiss that greasy, dirty bummer, calling him your darling Nancy before all the crowd!"

The face of the giant turned white with rage, and he trembled in every fiber as he rose to his feet, grating:

"Promise or no promise I got to go! I'll hunt him out, an' 'tar him wide open! I'll—I can't—it's comin'—"

His strained muscles relaxed. His clinched hands opened, and went tremblingly to his head. His breath came in short, painful gasps. A look of unutterable horror came into his eyes, only to chill and turn to a glassy stare, as his muscles stiffened, his form rose erect, and huskily the words fell from his lips:

"I'm comin', boss—comin' as fast as I kin!"

Even at the moment when his rage against the Old Boy of Tombstone was the hottest, Peter Papagon yielded to that magnetic power, unable to resist, unable to do aught but obey.

A curse of furious rage burst from the lips of the gambler at this fresh evidence of the power of the man whom he considered his foe, and he grasped the giant by the arm. All in vain the effort to stay him. With one sweep of that mighty arm, Carl Sherwood was hurled across the room, striking against Dan Abbles, who was just rising from his bunk, both falling in a heap, while Peter Papagon removed the bar, opened the door, and left the cabin without a single glance behind him.

"Shell I salivate the critter?" demanded Dan hotly.

For one instant Sherwood hesitated, and the life of Peter hung upon a thread. But then his mind was made up:

"On your life, no! Out and follow him. That white-headed devil has commanded him to come. He will go straight to the spot. Out and follow! Dog him home, and find out all you can. Overhear their speech, and if that big idiot reveals aught of what he heard here, note it down. Go—quick!"

Hasty and incoherent as was the speech of the half-stunned gambler, Dan Abbles comprehended what was expected of him, and dashing outside, he followed after Peter Papagon, who was slowly stalking toward the town, clearly visible in the bright moonlight. He never glanced around, and Dan kept close behind him, fearing no discovery, for the giant seemed like one in a dream, lost to all save the mute commands of his master.

But then came an abrupt change. Peter wheeled, and with a single stride was upon the astonished spy. Up rose his huge fist, then swiftly descended full into the face of his follower, as he muttered in a husky tone:

"Ef you say so, boss—thar he's got it, chuck-up!"

Like a log Dan Abbles fell, and Peter strode on once more.

CHAPTER XIII.

PLAIN LANGUAGE FROM DIANTHE.

NIGHT had once more fallen over Tombstone. The day had come and gone without anything out of the ordinary run of incidents in a lively mining camp, though much had been anticipated from the events of the past night at Dianthe's Bower.

The deadly reputation won by Carl Sherwood during a long career as card-sharp and fire-eater, was known to more than one of the Tombstone-ites, and their busy lips spread the tale with marvelous rapidity. Bets were freely offered that four-and-twenty-hours would not elapse before he called the white-headed professor to an account which would prove a final one, and these wagers were almost as eagerly accepted, for the Old Boy of Tombstone had made many friends and well-wishers among those who

witnessed his display of shrewdness, audacity and nerve in the bar-room and gambling saloon.

All day a close watch was maintained, but the expected "circus" did not come off. Professor Quack was around town, but nothing had been seen or heard of Sherwood until the night had fairly set in. Then he and Dan Abbles, the latter with a most beautiful pair of black eyes, slowly passed down the main street and entered the Bower. But where was the Old Boy?

No one could say. He had vanished all at once, as though he were indeed the diabolical personage he claimed to be.

Carl Sherwood bore unmistakable traces of the severe ordeal through which he had passed. His face was pale and haggard. There were dark circles around his eyes, and he looked like a man just recovering from a protracted debauch.

Scarcely had Dan Abbles left the cabin to spy upon Peter Papagon, than the unusual quantity of brandy which the gambler had swallowed began to assert its power, and Carl Sherwood fell into a stupor that lasted for hours. He was lying thus in a heap, just where the giant flung him, when Dan returned, his face covered with blood, his eyes almost entirely closed by that blow of Peter's poudorous fist, dealt in obedience to the commands of his distant master.

It was broad daylight, for Abbles had lain unconscious for nearly two hours. He swore to have bitter revenge on the giant, but he stood in no little awe of Sherwood, and not fully comprehending the plans that worthy had formed, he hastened back to the cabin for permission to follow and hunt up his enemy. Instead, he found Sherwood unable to speak, and in sheer disgust he lay down also.

It was nearly sunset when Carl Sherwood returned to consciousness. Dan briefly told his story, and asked the desired permission, but only to be denied, for the present. There was far more important business on hand, which must be attended to first.

A long consultation followed, during which Dan Abbles was fully enlightened as to the plans of his more astute comrade, then, each fully prepared to carry out the arrangement, they left the lone cabin and descended the slope leading into Tombstone. But they found themselves blocked at the very first step. The man they sought was nowhere to be seen.

"Tuck the skeer an' lit out fer keeps!" muttered Dan, in a tone of disgust, as they entered the Bower and looked in vain for Professor Jorammon Giltedge Quack.

"Keep your eyes open," was the reply, in the same guarded tones. "He'll turn up before the night's over. Let liquor alone, keep your head clear and weapons ready."

Will Avery had returned to Dianthe's Bower, with his pockets loaded with the money he had won on the night before, still moody, still resolved to abandon all hopes of winning the capricious queen of fortune, and to leave Tombstone forever as soon as he could lose the money which he considered hers. He was seated at the faro table when Carl Sherwood entered, playing heavily, betting recklessly, his face brightening a trifle when several bets in succession were lost, only to frown anew as fickle fortune veered in his favor.

He tried the tactics which had ended in his breaking the bank, on the night last past, but the dealer quietly told him that his orders were to decline all bets above a certain limit. And so, the queer spectacle of a man playing faro to lose, instead of win, continued.

Carl Sherwood did not play. He felt that his nerves were too severely shaken, his brain still too clouded by the fumes of the brandy, to risk their few remaining dollars. If he still hoped to make them the nucleus around which to gather the golden fortune they had wandered hither to reap, he must bide his time until the "signs" were right, until his brain had cleared, and his nerves fully recovered from that ordeal.

He seemed wholly absorbed in watching the players, but not a person entered either saloon or gaming hall, without his keen glance saw and summed them up. He was looking for the Old Boy of Tombstone, but that worthy came not.

Instead, Dianthe appeared, spending a few moments in the bar-room, then leisurely sauntering into the other apartment.

Her garb was the same as on the night last past, with the addition of a lace shawl, worn over her head and draped around her person after the Spanish fashion.

Carl Sherwood bowed low as she passed close by him, and a slight inclination of the proud head acknowledged the salute. But it was not this that caused the hot blood to mount the temples of the gambler. A soft, warm hand just touched his, leaving behind it a morsel of paper.

It was so wholly unexpected that for a brief space Carl Sherwood looked as confused and felt as bashful as any callow youth might under similar circumstances. The paper slipped from his startled fingers and fell to the floor, and though he quickly regained possession, that momentary clumsiness was fated to bear bitter fruit.

His open palm was broad enough to shelter the note when unfolded, and a single glance was sufficient to master the contents. There was neither address nor signature.

"I must speak with you in private. Follow me when I leave the Bower, but not closely enough to convey the impression that we are acting in concert."

That was all, but it proved quite enough to keep the suspicious brain of the gambler busy trying to read what lay between the lines. If a snare, a more tempting bait could not well have been found—so he mentally admitted, as his dark eyes followed the graceful figure of the queen of fortune through the long room.

He was still undecided when Dianthe reached the passage connecting the two rooms, where she paused and glanced back. He could see that her eyes were fixed inquiringly upon his face, and almost unconsciously he bowed his head. She smiled, then turned away, and shortly after left the Bower.

"That settles it!" he mentally exclaimed, slightly frowning. "I hardly meant it that way, but I can't go back on it now. If it's a trap, I'll not be the only one to suffer."

He caught the eye of Dan Abbles and made a sign which told him to remain where he was, then turned on his heel and left the Bower.

As he stepped out into the night Carl Sherwood cast a swift glance around him. Only a few rods distant he recognized the dainty figure of the gambler queen slowly moving down the street. A backward glance, which seemed to recognize him, then Dianthe glided rapidly along, as though fearing to be overtaken.

That was not Sherwood's cue at present. He was still suspicious of a trap. He could give no satisfactory reason why, but from the very first he had felt that Dianthe and the Old Boy of Tombstone were playing a subtle game in partnership. What they hoped to gain he could not even surmise. He would have taken his solemn oath that until the night last spent he and they had never met. Yet that bullet-pierced ace of diamonds—how had it fallen into the possession of this old man with the boyish face? How was he connected with the black past? In neither face nor figure did he resemble Harold Laurent. Besides, with the death of Harold and his beautiful bride, the family had become extinct.

With one hand clasping the butt of a trusty pistol, and his keen eyes roving suspiciously around, Carl Sherwood followed Dianthe through the town. Never once did she glance back until a low, flat-roofed building was reached, and then only for an instant, as she vanished in the shadows which hung around the entrance.

The building, of stone and adobe, was situated a little distance out of town, with no other house within a hundred yards or more. A few stunted sage bushes, some scattered rocks and an occasional clump of cacti were the immediate surroundings, affording ample cover for the formation of an ambush, if such was intended, and taking in all at a glance, Carl Sherwood veered aside from the course followed by Dianthe, and sinking down amid this cover, cautiously scouted around the premises, before his suspicions were lulled.

Even then he was not fully convinced that deadly danger did not lurk beneath that invitation, but as a low, mocking laugh came to his ears, he rose up and strode toward the door, in which he could just distinguish the form of the gambler queen.

"At last, Mr. Sherwood! Your promptness highly honors me!"

"Pardon me, if I read your note wrongly, lady," coolly responded Sherwood. "It mentioned a private interview, and I felt in duty bound to assure you that no eavesdroppers were lurking near. There are none—on the outside, at least."

"You are not certain about the interior? Bah!" and there was a trace of contempt in the low laugh which followed. "If I wished you ill, or meant you evil, what necessity for taking all these precautions? One word from me, the slightest hint that you were in my way, and a score of hands would fight each other for the honor of reaching your heart first!"

"I can readily believe all that, madam, from what I have seen since arriving at Tombstone. I know that a man, wishing to remove me, and gifted with your powers, would act as you hint; but you are a woman, and my experience tells me the dear creatures seldom act according to rule or reason."

"My invitation was not a command, Mr. Sherwood," coldly. "If your fears are greater than your curiosity, you can retire as you came, and I will seek a braver ally."

"I never retreat after taking the first step, madam. I am ready to hear what you have to say, and if I can serve you in any respect, you have but to point out the way."

"That sounds more like the man I took you for," with a short, emphatic nod of the head. "Come inside. You should feel very highly flattered at the invitation, for never since it was built, has this threshold been crossed by the feet of one of your sex."

Sherwood quickly stepped to her side, and entered the building, but as the door closed behind them, leaving all in utter darkness, he stepped swiftly and silently to one side, stooping low and holding himself in readiness to meet any treacherous attack.

Dianthe struck a match and lighted a lamp. When she turned toward Sherwood, he was quietly standing erect with arms folded, for his swift glances had satisfied him that they two were alone in the room.

This was small, though it occupied the entire space inclosed by those stout walls. The floor was carpeted, the walls hung with light-blue cloth, against which depended several pictures. In one corner stood a small cot-bed, hung around with white drapery. A small table, several chairs and a washstand formed the furniture, with the addition of a covered sewing-machine.

Dianthe sunk into a chair, near the table on which stood the lamp, and motioning toward another she said:

"Pray be seated, Mr. Sherwood. What I have to say to you can hardly be uttered in a breath, and you may as well take what comfort you can."

The gambler obeyed, removing his hat with an air of respectful attention. For a brief space Dianthe gazed at him, then a low, almost mocking laugh parted her rosy lips.

"Rumor has given you a great deal more credit than you deserve I fear, Mr. Sherwood. You have kept a lady waiting for full half an hour!"

"An unpardonable sin, madam, I admit; yet I am not entirely without excuse. True I felt the soft touch of your warm hand, read the words in the note that hand left in mine, saw the invitation repeated in your eyes as you left the room; but despite all that, I could not fully realize my good fortune. I felt that I was dreaming, and I was trying to waken—"

A frown and an impatient wave of the hand cut short his glib speech.

"And as that touch, that note, that glance all came from a woman, you, true to the insufferable conceit of your sex, jumped to the conclusion that they were but the prelude to a love-feast. You thought me a shameless wanton. Stop!" and her glorious blue eyes blazed vividly as he strove to speak. "Do not purjure yourself. Your thoughts were written plainly enough upon your countenance and in your eyes."

For a moment or two the gambler was confused by this sudden and wholly unexpected charge, none the less that it was undeniably true. But then he recovered his usual audacity, and there was neither shame nor hesitation in his reply:

"I have not the slightest intention of denying your charge, madam. That such an inference was not at all unnatural, your own words have proven. Then can you blame me?"

"Perhaps not, since you are a man! But, let there be no room for further misunderstanding. So far from inviting you here for a flirtation, either serious or otherwise, I sent that note for a very different purpose. I wished to say a few words to you in private, and those words, to use the vernacular, will have the bark on them."

"Not a very encouraging preamble," with a low, careless laugh. "But if it gives you any pleasure, behold your victim."

"You were at Tucson when you were told of the big game to be found at Tombstone. A man named Gustave Costello—better known as Antonio the Dago—gave you the information. He likewise told you that a woman ran the bank. He said that there was big money to be made here, and before you parted, you and your side-partner Dan Abbles, resolved to drift in this direction, to pick up a plum. Am I far out of the way?"

"Supposing I admit its truth, may I ask how you gained the information so quickly and accurately?"

"Simply because Antonio the Dago was sent by me, with full instructions how to act and what to say."

Sherwood was surprised, though his cold countenance admirably concealed the fact.

"Of course you had reasons?—other, I mean, than the desire to add our little capital to your bank capital."

"Although I am a woman, I never act without reasons. I have not done so in this case."

"May I ask what those reasons were?"

"Presently. I wish to prove to your complete satisfaction that I am not working in the dark—that I know who and what you are. To do this, I must speak plainly. I hope you will not be too seriously offended to hear me to an end, and to avert possible trouble, allow me to introduce this little peacemaker to your notice," quietly added Dianthe, whipping out a revolver and cocking it, the muzzle just showing above the edge of the table as she leaned back in her chair.

A slight smile curled the thin lips of the gambler, and there was a barely perceptible sneer in his voice as he said:

"Your bright eyes are far more dangerous than that pretty little toy, madam, for a wound

inflicted by them will never heal. Pardon, if I offend—I am dumb. Pray proceed."

The frown vanished, and was replaced by a faint smile. His matchless impudence amused the gambler queen.

"Be it so. I will take you at your word. Listen."

"Your name is not Carl Sherwood, but Frank Arnold."

"Who told you that?" demanded the gambler, a lurid blaze filling his eyes as he partially started from his seat, only to sink back again as that revolver rose to a level with his brain, the blue eyes glittering dangerously above the tube.

"Keep your seat, my dear sir. Why will you be so impetuous? If you keep on interrupting me after this fashion, my explanation will run along into the wee sma' hours."

With a violent effort, Sherwood regained his composure, and sunk back into his chair.

"Go on, madam. I am listening. When you are through, then I may ask you to listen to me, in turn."

"Your real name is Frank Arnold. You are a native of Louisiana. Your father was killed in a duel, and your mother did not very long survive that terrible shock. You were an only child, humored and spoiled from your very birth. You knew only one cross. That was the son of the man who was killed, even as he killed your father in that duel. His name was Harold Laurent, and you two were rivals from your very birth."

"I admit all this," said Sherwood, coldly, as Dianthe paused for breath. "How you gained the knowledge, I am at a loss to explain, but—"

He paused abruptly, his eyes flashing with a sudden suspicion, which he could only keep back by biting his teeth deep into his lips.

Dianthe gazed at him curiously, and seeing this, he said:

"My memory is very treacherous, this evening. I promised not to interrupt you. I will try and not sin again."

"Those were not the words that trembled on your lips when you cut them short," said Dianthe, meaningly.

"They are all that I have to offer, at present. Unless, indeed, I can spare you some trouble by acknowledging that I am—or, rather, was the Frank Arnold you mention."

"Not the least trouble in the world; rather a pleasure," with a mocking smile. "It is a wild and romantic story, that of your past, though some might consider it a trifle too sanguinary. A truly marvelous run of good luck, that of yours, my friend, which terminated in the death of Harold Laurent, of his young bride and her father!"

Sherwood's face was pale as death, but his voice did not show the slightest trace of agitation or emotion as he spoke:

"I was always noted for that. Still, as you say, it was a rather remarkable run of good fortune."

"Or skill?" meaningly. "There are some who would prefer that expression. Bah! why beat around the bush? In so many words, Frank Arnold, or Carl Sherwood, if you prefer the last cognomen—I say that you murdered Harold Laurent! More—I can prove the charge!"

"Are you not just a little intemperate, my dear madam? There was a fair wager. There were scores of eyes watching the game, and the majority of those present would have been only too glad to have caught me playing foully. They were satisfied, and said as much when questioned. I do not believe you were present, if even born at that time. What information you possess, therefore, must have come from another. To you, I simply say that you labor under a misconception. To your informant, if a man, I shall be only too happy to tell him that he lies in his teeth if he even hints at foul play in that game which cost Harold Laurent his life!"

"Dare you deny this; that when you were playing for that last stake, you stole the four aces, one after the other, as they came out in play, to use them with fatal effect in the final game, when your count stood five all?"

"I dare and do deny the charge, if charge it be!"

"Good!" and Dianthe nodded approvingly. "You have more nerve than I gave you credit for."

"Give me the name of the person who told you this story, who hints at my playing foul, and you will have still further cause for holding that opinion," slowly retorted Sherwood.

"I have no authority to give. I simply reasoned from the results of that game. So far as I know, neither man nor woman, with the exception of myself just now, ever gave that suspicion open utterance, though more than one must have entertained the doubt. Your land was enough for that."

"Of course I must accept your word, though I could almost wish it were different," he said coldly. "Was it to tell me this that you asked me to follow you here?"

"Partly. I wished to prove to you that not a page of your past life is sealed to me. I know that you have traveled under a score of aliases,

dropping them one after another and changing your base as often as the title and locality grew dangerous. I know that you have followed as many different occupations. Shall I name some of them?"

"If you care to do so," hiding a yawn with his hand.

"In St. Louis you were a counterfeiter. A pal was caught, and squealed. You were captured, but escaped by killing the officer who had you in charge.

"In New York you tried the same game, but had to flee. You went West, to grow up with the country. You tried your hand at gambling again, until broken; then you used a sand-club and your fingers to empty a pair of pockets belonging to another man. Unfortunately, that fool was something new to you, and the poor devil never recovered his consciousness after you felled him to the earth.

"Still more unfortunately—for you, this time—he was a well-known and rather popular character, and vigorous efforts were made to solve the mystery of his death. Gradually the clues were followed, until the point narrowed, and finally pointed so close to you, that you concluded your health demanded a change of air, and you left Omaha, between two days.

"Denver next had the honor of your patronage, and the duties of the police and detectives began looking up and growing more interesting is a remarkable coincidence! Once more you made a change of base, name and profession. This time you evinced a growing interest in the stock business. It proved more lucrative than intellectual, and you concluded it was too low for your abilities—after two ranchmen were killed.

"Again a transformation scene. The curtain rises, showing you in the title-role of stage-robber and road-agent. That was exciting enough, even for you, and you had ample opportunities for improving your mind by reading the letters which passed in the mail-bags. What matter if they were not all directed to the name you then went by? That did not prevent your taking great interest in their contents—particularly when they were negotiable.

"But why continue the list? Surely I have said enough to convince you that, if necessary, I could go back and account for every year, every month of your life after the night on which you shot Harold Laurent through the heart."

Dianthe paused, looking keenly at the gambler opposite.

A quiet, cynical smile was playing around his thin lips, but his face was as calm and composed as though her swift flow of words had contained nothing save the most commonplace remarks, instead of scathing denunciations.

"Am I expected to reply to this remarkable arraignment?"

"If you can," was the swift retort.

"Why not?" with an innocent uplifting of his heavy eyebrows. "Shall I admit all that you have said, or have you fully satisfied your whim as romancer?"

"Can you deny its absolute truth?"

"I could, of course. But is it worth the trouble?"

"You should be the best judge of that!" a little sourly, as though this cool composure provoked her. "I have made the charges. I can substantiate them, every one, if necessary."

"Yet the list is not quite as complete as it might be. You have omitted one of the most important and interesting of all my roles. Think it over. Can you not guess it?"

Dianthe stared at him fixedly for a brief space, her brows knitted, her eyes glowing with strangely mingled doubts. Then her eyes fell, as though in reflection, and a mocking laugh burst from the gambler as he bent swiftly over and wrested the revolver from her hand, turning the muzzle full upon her bosom, as she started to her feet.

"Cool and easy, madam!" he said, smiling like a very demon, as she stood at bay. "Your knowledge is marvelous, your courage is ditto, but your wisdom is positively nil!"

"How dare you! What do you mean?" she panted, angrily.

"That you know altogether too much of my past life. That I shall have to earn one more title—that of *lady-killer*!" he said, speaking slowly, clearly, with a cold, devilish smile, as his dark eyes glanced along the leveled tube.

CHAPTER XIV.

A PARTNER WANTED.

SEPARATED only by the small table, they confronted each other, he with leveled pistol, a cruel light in his black eyes, his thin lips drawn back until a glimpse of his white, pointed teeth could be caught beneath his drooping mustache. She, more beautiful than ever in her proud anger, her blue eyes flashing, her superb form drawn up undauntedly, as though defying the threatened bullet.

A moment this tableau, then came an abrupt change. A soft laugh parted those ruby lips, and a smile chased away the frown as she said:

"My dear sir, you are a better actor than I gave you any credit for being, but at the same time allow me to observe that you are encour-

aging a very reprehensible and altogether abominable practice, in pointing a loaded pistol at a human being. It is decidedly dangerous!"

"The danger lies at *your* end of the weapon, not mine," with a short laugh. "You set me the example, and cannot blame me for following it. The only difference is that I intend carrying it a little further than you had an opportunity of doing."

"In other words, you intend shooting me?"

"Accidentally, of course."

"That goes without saying. Are you not a southern gentleman, too chivalrous to harm a lady—*purposely*?" with a low laugh that sounded marvelously like mockery, as she gracefully sunk back into the chair which she vacated when the weapon was so dexterously wrested from her grasp. "Now I am ready for the sacrifice, Mr. Sherwood. It will look so much nicer to be found in a chair, and not scattered all over the floor, especially as I have never practiced the falling act!"

Her cool audacity pleased as well as amazed him. At the same time, he had an uncomfortable suspicion that Dianthe was not as wholly in his power as matters on the surface appeared to indicate. Unless she had some secret resource, some powerful ally within call, would she be so cool, so sarcastic?

He did not know that these thoughts were plainly imprinted upon his countenance, and gave another start of surprise as Dianthe spoke again:

"You are right, my dear sir. You *are* in my power, not I in *yours*! I am a woman, but for all that, if you try to buy me for a fool, you will get badly left, to use the vernacular.

"But," with a complete change of voice, tone and look, "enough of this nonsense. Lower that weapon, Carl Sherwood."

"I obey, madam; but not without warning you that I remain on my guard. If any treachery is attempted, you will be the worst sufferer," and he lowered the pistol, though still keeping it at full cock with his finger on the trigger.

"My dear fellow, you are 'way off your base," smiled the gambler queen, a languid insolence pervading her tones. "At any moment since you entered this room, your life has been entirely at my disposal. My showing that pistol, was simply to throw you on the wrong scent. You smile; very good! If I had not a better use for you, I would prove my words so thoroughly that you would never say one word in contradiction. As it is, pray oblige me by moving aside just a few feet."

"To which side, madam?"

"If I said *one*, you would feel bound to go directly opposite. Please yourself," laughed Dianthe, opening a little drawer on the side of the table next her seat, and producing a package of cigarettes, one of which she lighted and inserted between her rosy lips.

Sherwood arose and stepped back to the door, holding to the knob with one hand behind him.

A slight click, then a trap-door opened in the floor directly opposite Dianthe, the chair on which the gambler had been seated, falling through the opening.

"Is that proof enough, Mr. Sherwood?" mockingly demanded Dianthe, as the trap-door, apparently without her agency, rose again and closed with a snap. "When you thought you held me at your mercy, you were wholly in my power. The slightest touch of my foot would have released the catch that holds that trap, and you would have shot down to—not a bed of eider down, to say the least. I did not make that move; and why? Simply because I have a better use for you. Your death would not benefit me in the least, while, unless I am sadly mistaken, I will make a fortune through your life and acting."

Despite his nerve, Sherwood turned a shade paler as he saw how close he had been to death. He knew that Dianthe had not spoken without good reason, and acting on a sudden impulse, he reversed the pistol in his hand, and passing around the hidden trap, held the butt of the weapon toward her.

"You have convinced—and conquered me, madam. Please accept this toy, and pardon my folly. And now, if you are not entirely disgusted with me, pray inform me where I may sit, without too severely testing the power of a spring with my weight, and on my part, I promise not to doubt anything you may choose to say, however impossible it may appear."

With a low bow in return, Dianthe accepted the weapon, putting it back amid the folds of her dress, then said:

"The trap is perfectly safe, but if it will relieve your mind of any uneasiness, choose your own location, and I will tell you why I have treated you to this strange preamble."

Carl Sherwood drew another chair forward, and planted it precisely where he had sat at first. Dianthe rewarded him with a dazzling smile, but changed her own position.

"That is more like the fearless man I expected to see, when I sent for you to visit Tombstone; but I will not hold you under the slightest constraint, and pledge you my honor that I cannot reach the spring from here, even if I were to try. More than that, you are at per-

fect liberty to take your departure, at any moment, if you have no curiosity to listen further. Still I hope you will remain.

"Your slightest wish is my law, madam, from this on," gravely responded the gambler.

"Thanks. You may find your reward—who knows? Now, pray tell me why you suspected me of having lured you into a snare? What object could I gain thereby?"

"You have been wonderfully frank with me, madam, and now I will treat you in the same manner. You must have heard what occurred at the Bower last night, after your departure. I have reason to look upon that man—Professor Quack, as he calls himself—as a deadly enemy. He sent a spy after me and my partner, and no doubt that spy overheard me relate the story of my past, as it concerned Harold Laurent. Of course he delivered his report. To my certain knowledge, there is none other in or around Tombstone who could possibly have known of that tragedy, and my connection with it. Hence, it follows that you are in league with the man who calls himself the Old Boy of Tombstone."

"Your reasoning is close, but your deductions false, my dear sir," drawled Dianthe, watching the rings of blue vapor as they curled aloft over her head. "There is not the slightest connection between that elderly gentleman and myself. That he is your enemy, I freely admit, and all the more dangerous because he is such purely as a matter of business."

"You mean that he is a detective? And on my track?"

"A detective—yes; on your track—possibly; but if so, he struck the trail since you came here. In sober fact, he is piping *me*!"

"You?" echoed Sherwood, once more thoroughly astonished.

Dianthe nodded, with a low laugh.

"Exactly: shadowing me, and no doubt he is congratulating himself on a brilliant success, with little trouble or danger attending it. He may be right, but I am not so sure. A woman can strike back, and strike hard, sometimes."

"But surely you have committed no crime—have no cause to fear a detective? The fellow is a fool!" exclaimed Carl.

"Far from it, my friend," and a sober expression chased away the amused smile, as the blue eyes darkened. "That man is one of the deadliest, surest sleuth-hounds in the secret service. He can disguise himself so that his own mother would deny him. He can play any part, assume almost any shape, changing so swiftly and perfectly as to defy detection. I would rather have a thousand ordinary detectives on my track than that single man!"

"You say you know him. That you are positive he is on *your* track. Yet he is still living," slowly uttered Sherwood.

"Because I only penetrated his disguise last night, when you and he came together at the Bower. That discovery made clear to me several incidents which had thoroughly perplexed me, and proved that the Old Boy—to give him the name he chooses to be known by for the present—was on my track."

"And now that you *do* know him?"

"I ask you to join hands with me, and together we will prove more than a match for the blood-hound, cunning as he is. For that purpose, I invited you to this interview."

"And lured me all the way from Tucson?" quickly.

Dianthe laughed, and shook her head.

"You are trying to spring a trap, now. Did I not say that my eyes were opened to the truth, only last night? My purpose in sending for you, was very different."

"And is to remain a secret for the present?"

"Not if you pledge me your word to join with me in outwitting this sleuth. He is as much your enemy as mine—more so, if possible, for he must know that I am only a novice in the art which owns you as a past master. He will turn his attention to you, first, as the greater criminal, no doubt."

"If all that you have accused me of were true, no doubt; but please bear in mind that I have admitted nothing."

"Bah!" with a scornful fling of her jeweled hand. "I begin to believe that rumor has greatly overrated you, Frank Arnold! The man I sought, knew no fear, counted no risk."

"Perhaps I have learned wisdom, here at Tombstone."

"Let us hope it be not *cowardice*, for then your doom is sealed, beyond all hope! Look you, Carl Sherwood. I am not your enemy. I would be your friend, your ally. I could have solved all doubts as to your identity, last night, and no doubt purchased immunity for myself, simply by denouncing you to the Old Boy as the man on whose head is set a round score of rewards. I did not do so. More, I prevented a collision between you two, through which that demon hoped to solve his doubts. I foiled him then, I will aid you in foiling him for all time; but you must trust me throughout, not half-way."

"Should the trust be wholly on one side?" quietly asked the gambler. "You say that this fellow has been piping *you*. Go a little further and tell me for what reason."

"Oh, a case of mistaken identity, of course," with a light laugh, which was cut short by Carl Sherwood rising from his seat, his cheeks flushed, his eyes glittering.

"If you sent for me to come here, simply for the purpose of laughing at me, madam, the sooner we part, the better. Allow me to bid you good-evening," and he bowed, low as he backed toward the door, pausing as Dianthe made an abrupt gesture.

"I sent for you to receive a business proposition. Let the subject we have just been discussing, drop for the present. Forget that I am a woman, and consider that a man of business is talking with you. In one word, I want a partner in the Bower."

A faint smile curled the gambler's lips, as he resumed his seat, before replying. When he did speak, it was to the point, the words issuing sharply.

"Are you quite sure that you are not already provided?"

The big blue eyes grew larger with genuine surprise, as their owner stared into the dark face before her.

"I do not understand your meaning, sir. Pray make it a little plainer, if you can."

"Last night there was a young man playing at your faro table. He played like a novice, or a man who was resolved to empty his pockets as quickly as possible. He was about putting down his last stake, when you very considerably took the place of dealer. From that time on, the young fellow won every bet that he planted, and in the end, you announced that the bank was broken."

"I remember. If I am not mistaken, you contributed to that unfortunate result," coldly responded Dianthe, as Carl Sherwood paused, with a keen glance into her face.

"I won a trifle, I admit, purely by way of experiment. As you know I came here to break your bank, if possible. When you hear of these big games, played without a limit, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, you will find that there is a mouse in the meal-bag."

"In other words, a brace game," coldly amended Dianthe.

"Precisely. And it was my object to discover whether it was the case here; before I bucked too heavily against the tiger, especially as I had a partner in the game. For that reason, too, it was my business to distrust such a run of luck, and so I bet against the young fellow, believing that if his playing was genuine, and there was any loose screw in the game, the small bet would be paid in preference to the larger."

"I lost, and he won. Then I believed that my first suspicions were correct. That he was only a capper, playing so high simply to draw on others, and increase the interest by proving that the bank could stand heavy losses without flinching. And acting on this belief, I placed my next wager just as he did his, coppering the queen. Of course I now expected to lose my stake, but he still won, still doubled, and I followed suit, willing to pay a price for the information I sought."

"I learned more than I either wished or expected. And then you declared the bank closed for the night. Really it was a most extraordinary run of luck!"

"Such as will occasionally happen," concealing a yawn behind her white hand. "Of course you do not hint that there was anything wrong with either betting or dealing?"

"On the contrary. I haven't the slightest doubt but all was perfectly right—for your plans. Good looking young fellow, lovely woman, daring betting, skillful dealing—taken all in all, an excellent combination! And no doubt that very combination will win in the end!"

Dianthe gazed steadily into his face for a breath, then leaned back in her chair again, laughing softly.

"You saw it all, then? Really, my dear fellow, you have better eyes and keener wits than ever I gave you credit for!"

"I saw that you were dealing out of a combination box, and that twice, at least, you made the bank lose where the ordinary run of the cards would have made it a winner. It was admirably performed, and even I would never have suspected the truth, had I not sat down to watch for just such play. I have explained why. It was not curiosity, but business."

"I understand, and am not blaming you in the least."

"Yet you persist in saying that you desire a partner?"

"Of course. If a woman, I am not *all* inconsistent."

"And you wish me to accept that position?"

"Since I offered it to you, of course!" a little shortly.

"One more question," and Sherwood showed the tips of his teeth in a peculiar smile. "Have you any interest in the graveyard of this enterprising little burg?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Dianthe, her eyes wide open.

"That were I to accept your proposal, and the fact of our partnership should become

known in town, there would be a funeral, sure! Will Avery would kill me, or compel me to kill him, just as certainly as two and two make four!"

As he spoke, the gambler kept a close watch upon the face of his fair opposite, and his eyes glittered as he saw the warm blood mounting higher and higher. But the voice of the gambler queen expressed only wonder as she uttered:

"Pray why so? What should make you two enemies?"

"He loves you, and we would quarrel on that point. I would brook no rival. If you and I ever become partners in one respect, we must in all. Marry me, and I will fall in with whatever plans you may make. How does that strike you?"

"Suppose I should tell you that I am already a wife?"

"Do more than that. Tell me the name of your husband, and where I can find him, and I pledge you my word of honor that you may begin putting on the widow's weeds with the morrow!"

It sounded a little bombastic, but for all that, Dianthe could see that the speaker meant every word that he uttered.

CHAPTER XV.

A BUSINESS ARRANGEMENT.

SHE gazed steadily into the gambler's face, as though striving to read his innermost thoughts, and for a few moments black eyes and blue met fully. There was a fiery ardor in the darker orbs that caused the lighter ones to waver and sink, while a soft flush gradually suffused their owner's cheeks, and Dianthe seemed the personification of maidenly modesty and confusion; but only for a breath of time.

Once more the cerulean orbs flashed into his, there was a roguish smile playing about her red lips, and her voice was more playful than he had ever heard it; as she said:

"I am almost sorry that I am single, and consequently unable to test your devotion. However, we'll take it for granted, until a proper occasion for proving it arises."

"What better time than the present?" demanded Carl Sherwood, throwing off his careless air and leaning across the little table which alone separated them, his face flushing, his dark eyes all aglow, his words coming swiftly, impetuously.

"Dianthe, you claim to know my past most thoroughly. You say that you have made it a study. If so, you must have known what would be the ultimate result of the proposition which you have just made to me. You must have felt it an impossibility for me to see you daily, nightly, to be so intimate as we two must, if this partnership-scheme is carried out, without a nearer and dearer tie than that of mere business. If you foresaw this, and still made me the proposition, then you cannot affect either surprise or indignation at the words I am speaking now."

"From the very first glimpse of your face, I felt an interest far deeper than I ever thought I could again feel in a woman. I do not say that this would not have passed away, in course of time, or at least have grown no stronger, had our intercourse been the usual commonplace affair, for I am no unfledged schoolboy, to be enchanted by simply a lovely face. But you were not content to let it be so."

"You brought me here. You have humbled, flattered, abused and praised me by turns. You have shown me that you are something far more rare than a simply lovely woman. In one word, you have made me fall over head and ears in love with you, whether you so intended or not."

"You know what I am. I frankly admit that the hasty sketch which you gave of my life, is true in every respect. I admit that I have committed almost every crime in the decalogue—that if my life is spared long enough, I will no doubt repeat the programme with variations. But of one sin I am innocent—of that I never will be guilty. In all my life I have never played a woman false, or left her worse than I found her. Any trust reposed in me by one of your sex, has been considered and kept sacred."

"You say that you are in danger equally with myself. I say, give me the right to protect you, and that danger will disappear now and forever. Your word shall be my law. I will stand between you and the whole world. I will—I do love you, as I little thought to ever care for woman again."

Dianthe raised her hand with an appealing glance, as though she found this passionate avowal painful to listen to.

Carl Sherwood paused short, with a submissive bow.

"I am almost sorry that you have uttered these words, Mr. Sherwood," she said, speaking slowly, gravely, yet without a trace of anger in her tones. "I may have been blind, as you hint, but, all the same, I never once thought of your making such an avowal—at least, this soon."

"I can wait; only don't shut off all hopes," hastily interposed Sherwood. "Test my devo-

tion thoroughly if you have any doubts as to its perfect sincerity."

"Wait!" with a swift gesture. "I do not love you. I do not know as I ever can. But this much I do know—I will never love, much less wed, a man who has not most thoroughly proved his devotion. Not long since I thought I had met that man."

"You allude to Mr. Avery?" asked Sherwood, with a peculiar light flaming up in his dark eyes.

Dianthe bowed, lighting a fresh cigarette. "I do. You remember you were the first to mention his name in connection with some pretty broad hints. In justice to myself, as well as you, I have a few words to say about him."

"I needed a man whom I could thoroughly trust. I noticed Will Avery, and believed that I had found what I was looking for. He was young, seemed impressive, and was in a position to perform what I desired; but on being tested, he proved unavailable. In plainer words, entirely too honest for my needs. Yet I do not entirely despair, nor consider my efforts entirely wasted in that direction."

"I hardly think you will reap much benefit from that quarter," said Sherwood, coldly, yet with emphasis.

"What do you mean?"

"That I am quite sure I noticed a very unhealthy look in that young man's face. I would be willing to wager a few hundreds that he will not live long."

Dianthe stared fixedly into the face of the gambler.

"You mean—"

"That the man who falls in love with you, from this day on, will never live to wear gray hairs, unless he already possesses them!" was the cold, deadly interjection, rendered doubly emphatic by the lurid light which flashed in his eyes.

"I really believe the man means it!" exclaimed Dianthe, with a short laugh, her eyes sparkling. "If I were to say to you: This man is growing troublesome and has outlived his term of usefulness?"

"You would not have to repeat the words. That man would drop out of sight as thoroughly and effectually as though he had never been born," was the quiet response.

"I have heard of such men," softly breathed Dianthe, her eyes downcast, apparently speaking to herself. "But I never met one before; I did not believe one such lived."

"Put me to the test, and so solve your doubts forever."

"I will; and if you fail me not, then—"

"Then?" echoed Sherwood, as the gambler queen paused.

"I will grant your first request, be its nature what it may," slowly responded the woman, gazing frankly into his face.

"You have said it!" cried Sherwood, rising and passing swiftly around the table. "It is a bargain; and thus I seal the compact!" trying to clasp her in his arms and press a kiss upon her red lips, but without success, as she deftly eluded his ardent embrace, slipping aside and motioning him back with the pistol which flashed from its place of hiding.

"Restrain yourself, Carl Sherwood. I pay no debts before they are due—least of all, such as *this*. No man has—no man ever shall touch my lips with his, until he has the right as my lawful husband. Not even you shall make the attempt the second time with impunity. Try it, and I swear to shoot you dead, true as there is a heaven above us!"

The face of the gambler flushed hotly, but he fell back.

"You are prudish, Dianthe!"

"A woman in my position *must* be prudish, since you use that term. If she does not respect herself, who will? Not the man whom she foolishly favors, most assuredly. Lightly won, lightly valued. *Earn* the right, then claim it, and I will not deny you. Until then, please keep your distance, and we will be all the firmer friends and allies."

Sherwood did not look as though he thoroughly appreciated the force of this argument—what man would under the same circumstances—but he bowed and retreated to his former position with the best grace he could summon.

"Your will is law, of course, Dianthe. But if you make my probation too long, you must expect me to break it."

"If you do I will kill you just as I would any other violator of my rights—that I solemnly swear!" declared the woman, with an earnestness which could not be mistaken.

"Let that pass. To business. I owe you an explanation concerning Will Avery, and it may as well be given now as hereafter—unless you are repenting your bargain?"

"You have my word. I never go back on that," coldly.

"I came to Tombstone, like you, to make money. Honestly, if possible, but—to make money! I have done well with the Bower. My profits average two hundred dollars a day. A neat little income, but not enough to satisfy me. I am tired of this life, and wish to leave it. But I must have plenty of money to live as

my tastes demand, and I fancied I saw a way to procure that more rapidly than by selling poison and dealing faro for drunken roughs.

"With money in view, I selected Will Avery as the most serviceable tool at my command. You know the position he holds. Through that he knows just when money is sent from or brought to the mills to pay off the hands.

"Being a woman, I could not help seeing that the foolish fellow had fallen in love with me—or what he would! doubtless term love—and I gave him an occasional encouraging smile, until he was ready to pluck, as I believed.

"He met me one afternoon, by accident, as he thought, while strolling out of town, and before we parted, I had learned what I desired—though at the cost of hearing the silly fellow spout love for an hour!"

Dianthe paused abruptly, staring at Carl Sherwood for a moment, then bursting into merry laugh as she exclaimed:

"Upon my soul! I really believe the man is jealous!"

"Not in the least," retorted the gambler, though his eyes and face flatly belied his speech. "Only interested. He told his love. And you?"

"Made my escape as soon as possible, without giving him a positive answer, one way or the other. I believed that I would have further use for him, and on that account could not speak as plainly as I otherwise might. Remember, I wanted money. And then, I had not yet met you."

"Two admirable reasons. Particularly the last!"

If there was a sneer concealed in this speech, Dianthe did not appear to notice the fact, but placidly continued:

"I am glad my conduct has your approval, though you could scarcely blame me if it should be otherwise, since you had not made your appearance on the stage at that time.

"Do you remember the stage robbery of last week?"

"I heard something about it; but what has that to do with either you or young Avery?"

"Much—everything, in fact, since it was owing to his confidence and my listening, that the stage was robbed at all," with a low laugh.

Sherwood started and stared at her intently. She nodded, with a provoking smile, then answered his unspoken question:

"Exactly! I engineered that job, and I am rather proud of the manner in which it was put into execution, too. Rather neat for a novice, was it not?"

"I give it up!" muttered Sherwood, sinking back in his chair, with a resigned expression upon his countenance. "You are too much of an enigma for me. I think I see through you, one moment, only to be more deeply in the fog the next. Pray continue. I'll swallow anything, after that, without a word."

"You don't believe my story? Is that what you mean?"

"Did I not say that I would accept any statement you chose to make, without questioning?" retorted Sherwood.

"Your tongue says one thing, your eyes and face just the contrary!" snapped the gambler queen. "But I don't care. You will have to believe it ere long if you remain in partnership with me. For just as surely as I robbed that stage, we will rob others, you and I—unless the first step frightens you as badly as it did Will Avery."

"Did he suspect you of using the information he let fall that afternoon?" demanded Sherwood.

"Of sharing in the robbery? Bless the man! didn't I say that the simple fellow was over head and ears in love with me—or, rather, the angel without wings for which he mistook your humble servant? How could he doubt me? Only, as he let the secret escape that the company was expecting a heavy consignment of greenbacks with which to pay off their hands for that month, and as, three days afterward, the stage was robbed of that very amount, he kept a closer guard over his lips, and I dare not question him too closely.

"To pay him off for his caution, and to make him more reckless, I frowned where I had smiled, rebuffed him when he had sought to gain an answer to his suit. You saw one instance, I believe, last night. It was the last feather, though I had given him credit for more sand. It drove him to the faro table, resolving to drop what money he held in winnings and then either blow out his brains or levitate to some more comfortable region.

"I saw this in his face, and acted accordingly. I knew that he would never run away while he had a dollar left that came from my table. He had said enough to convince me of so much. I still hoped to make him of service, and with that end in view, I brought my combination box into play. I allowed, or, rather made him break the bank, knowing that the money would surely be played in again. To guard against his following the same reckless tactics to-night, I gave orders to run a limit. With that as a check, I defy him to play in all his winnings short of three nights. By that time, I shall have concluded whether to let him go, or rivet the old chain—"

"A coffin will hold him more certainly—and that will be his only reward, if he does not decamp," shortly.

"Not unless I give you the word, my dear sir!" positively. "If I cannot use him, all good and well. The sooner he drops out of sight, the better—just how, is immaterial to me. But until a better plan is formed, you will please keep your hands off him. Is that plain enough?"

"Plainer than you think, perhaps," with a frown.

"Once for all, Carl Sherwood—listen!" and her eyes flashed vividly as she bent across the table. "You say you love me. You say you will do anything to win me. You must prove your vows, or openly abandon all hopes of success. What I say you must perform, if man can do it. If I say strike, I expect the desired blow to fall. And when I say hold—if you strike instead, all is over between you and me, save that I will set the bloodhounds of the law on the trail they have searched for this many a day. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly. I am to do all and receive nothing."

"Until you earn a reward," swiftly amended Dianthe. "He who makes a practice of paying in advance, soon has to put up his shutters for the last time. But you know the conditions. Accept or reject them, once for all. I have said my last word."

"I accept, of course. Command and I will obey," coldly.

"Good enough! When the time comes, if you are not perfectly satisfied with your reward, then it will not be my fault. There is my hand on it."

Sherwood grasped the plump little paw, and touched it with his lips. Dianthe flushed hotly, then turned pale as a corpse as she swiftly drew it back, covering her confusion with the hasty speech:

"One more point, and then we will say good-night."

"You understand now why I believe that the detective who calls himself the Old Boy of Tombstone is after me?"

"Because of that stage affair? How can that be, when the robbery occurred only last week, while he has been here for more than a week, certain?"

"I forgot that I had not made full confession. You cut me off so short, that I really forgot to add that I had played the same game on three different occasions, up above. The last affair was wretchedly bungled, somehow. Possibly because I was not an active participant in the raid. There was a trap set, and my boys blundered into it. Two were killed, the rest finally getting clear. I suspect that one of the lost had life enough in him to tell more than he should, and learning that the detectives were busy with the case, I levanted. As the most favorable opening, I struck Tombstone, but that sleuth has come, too. Putting this and that together, is it strange that I came to the conclusion that I was wanted?"

"You may be right," slowly responded the gambler. "If so, the one who strikes first will probably get the best of it. I did think of trapping the fellow, to learn from him how that bullet-marked card came into his possession, after all these years; but since you are threatened, the shortest way will be the best and surest."

"I am not so sure," slowly replied Dianthe, her pretty brows wrinkled, a far-away look in her eyes. "If he intended to strike at once, why didn't he do so last night? There may be more in this than we as yet suspect. If we could only get him into our power alive, we could wring the truth from his lips, by torture if not by threats. If—I believe it can be done—I know it can!" the frown vanishing before a peculiar smile.

"Tell me how, and if it is practicable, count on me."

"I only see the scheme vaguely as yet. I must have time to perfect it—to weigh all the chances for or against. Give me until to-morrow night, then I will tell you my plan."

"Granted; always providing the gentleman does not try to get in his fancy work before that time. If he does, there will be a free circus in Tombstone!"

"That of course—and if I am near enough I'll play the band!" laughed Dianthe, arising from her chair.

"You are going back to the Bower?" asked Sherwood, also rising. "If so, allow me to escort you—"

"Not to-night, to the question; never, to the request. You must not blame me, Carl, if I appear prudish; it is my only safeguard. Thus far the people here, even the roughest, respect me, because they see that I walk alone, asking and receiving favors from no man. I must not make an exception of you—at least openly, nor yet. When the time comes—when our ends are gained, and we can leave here with money enough to live an honest and reputable life in some foreign land—you shall never have cause to accuse me of coldness toward you."

"But if I am to be your partner in the Bower—"

"That can be kept secret for the present. I can run the place, just as I have so far. You can play, when there is no more important work on hand, to keep up appearances. But what I need you for most is to take charge of the outdoor department. I have a dozen good men, who can work as well as the best, but they lack a leader to guide and instruct. When we went through that coach, I was at their head; and a most charming youth I made, if I do say so myself! But, all the same, I am not in love with the masculine garments—when I am compelled to fill them myself!"

"You shall never do so again with my consent," gravely uttered Sherwood. "The risk is too great. What if you had been shot that night—"

"Then this pestiferous detective would not be troubling my dreams and giving me the nightmare," she laughed lightly. "But you shall have your way in this. I will contrive to gain the necessary information from Will Avery, and you can make use of it according to your own judgment. If he fails me, then I turn him over to your tender mercies."

"Of which he shall never complain—that I promise you, my darling!" and the red glitter in his eyes told how sincerely he spoke those words.

"Then it is all understood? You are a partner in the Bower, but a very silent one, for the present. You agree to treat me as a stranger, whenever we meet. To never follow me, never call here, unless on my invitation. To take charge of the men I have enlisted and proved. To carry out whatever schemes I may form. And to wait patiently for your reward."

"That will be hard, but with so much in view, even though I can only guess how far distant, I can stand it. You have only my pledge. Trust in me, even as I trust in you."

He spoke gravely, impressively, holding both her hands in his, as he stood and gazed earnestly down into her eyes.

She met his look frankly. Her face, too, was grave. They each seemed taking a solemn vow.

"I will contrive to see you to-morrow evening. If not here, in some other place where we can converse without reserve or fear of being overheard."

"Unless the Old Boy of Tombstone interferes."

"That is understood. Don't avoid him too plainly, but at the same time, try and avoid an open collision. If that comes, either he or you must fall, and his death might make matters all the worse, by setting other enemies at work, whom we do not know to be such, as we feel certain he is."

"I'll bear your warning in mind, but I'll never show the white feather to him!"

"Nor any other man, I trust," with an eloquent glance. "It was that—your reputation for utter fearlessness in the face of overwhelming odds, that first attracted my fancy. I acted on the impulse of a moment, in sending for you—but I am not sorry that I did so now!"

His head involuntarily bent itself as these words came softly, shyly from her rosy lips, but instantly the motion was checked as he saw her shrink back, and his voice was low, unsteady as he muttered:

"I must go—if I staid longer, vow or no vow, I would venture all for a kiss!"

"It is indeed time for you to go!" she murmured, gliding to the door and opening it. "I neither dare trust you—nor myself any longer! Go—if you love me—go!"

He crossed the threshold, then bowed his head over her hand and pressed a hot kiss upon it.

As he did so, a hoarse, mad cry broke upon their ears, and was followed by a shot from only a few yards distant.

With a gasping moan, Carl Sherwood fell at Dianthe's feet!

CHAPTER XVI.

A JEALOUS LOVER.

So sudden, so utterly unexpected was this catastrophe, that Dianthe was almost overthrown by the body of the gambler as he fell forward against her, only saved from falling by being crowded against the door-jamb.

A little cry of surprise and horror escaped her lips—then she whipped forth a pistol and darted outside—only to stagger back again as a tall, well-known figure confronted her revolver in hand.

"Merciful heavens!" she gasped, the words barely articulate as they fell from her blanched lips. "You—a murderer—an assassin!"

"Or an avenger—call it by the term you think the most appropriate!" was the stern response. "I care not—so that my work is well done—so that his ribald tongue will never boast of the shame and disgrace he has brought upon your name!"

The look of shrinking horror vanished in an indignant glow, and the gambler queen confronted him bravely, defiantly, the revolver in her hand flashing in the moonlight as she raised it to a level with his breast.

"How dare you couple my name with such foul terms!" she cried, her voice harsh and un-

natural, her blue eyes glowing until they seemed to be filled with living fire.

A short, hard laugh cut her short.

"When a man has seen what I have seen, and knows what I have learned during the past two hours, he can dare almost anything—even your anger, madam, has few terrors for him. What I said, I repeat. If that man has not already brought shame upon you, it is not because you failed to give him the opportunity—Shoot, if you care to!" and his voice bore in it a trace of contempt, mingling with the deep sorrow of a blasted love. "I have not found life such a pleasant dream, that I need flinch from death at the hands of one whom I loved as never man loved before—"

Strong emotion choked his voice, as he left the sentence unfinished, though still confronting the leveled pistol, as though eager for the shot which would forever end the torture he was then enduring.

For a moment, his life hung on a thread frail as ever spider web; but then Dianthe lowered her weapon murmuring:

"You know not what you have done, Will Avery—"

"Do I not?" he interrupted, with a sudden blaze of fury. "Ay, and glory in the act—though I could wish that the rascal knew to whose hand he owes his death!"

"I saw you at the Bower, when you passed him that note, though I made no sign. I could not. It seemed as though my blood was suddenly turned to ice. I could not move, speak, or even breathe. Yet I saw it all. Saw him read the note. Saw you pause at the door and look back with a smile—just such a smile as you have more than once treated me with!"

"I saw him bow—I saw you return the signal, and then leave the house. I saw him follow after, and that broke the spell which seemed to bind me."

"I knew that you had made an assignation with him—gambler, ruffian, criminal, for aught you knew—and my blood was boiling over, yet I kept it within bounds. While there was the faintest doubt, I would not expose you to ridicule or scandal."

"I drew out of the game and followed after, just in time to see that man follow you into the house—here, where you so often told me that never a man could pass, not even your most intimate friend; so fearful were you that the sharp-edged tongue of scandal might sully your fair name!"

"Had I been a minute quicker, I would have shot him ere his foot could have crossed your threshold, but I came too late. I did the next best thing. I waited and watched—for a lifetime, as it seemed to my maddened brain. The moon tells me that it was at least two hours."

"Then you two came to the door. I caught the endearing words which you interchanged—then he bent his head, to kiss you! Even if I had not resolved to put it out of his power to boast of his success, that action would have driven me mad. I shot him. I am only sorry that I can not bring him back to life again—to kill him once more!"

Swiftly these hot words were uttered, unheeding the gestures with which Dianthe sought to check the flood. Will Avery was hardly accountable for what he did or said, just then. As he said, his love for her, was such as mankind seldom feel, fortunately for themselves. For days he had been driven to the very verge of despair, and now he was but little better than a madman.

He ceased speaking, and stood before her, with arms folded, head bowed, the picture of utter despair and hopelessness. At that moment he would gladly have welcomed a shot from the pistol which still threatened his life.

"I say again, you know not what you have done, Will Avery! The man whom you have so brutally murdered, without giving him the slightest show to defend himself, came here because he had a perfect right to do so, before all the world—"

Her swift, passionate words startled the jealousy maddened young man out of his moody apathy, and he felt a fresh pang tearing at his heart-strings, as he faltered:

"A right to come—his is your husband?"

"No—my brother! And you have murdered him—"

Was it instinct that warned her? That caused her to abruptly break off and turn toward the fallen form. That, or providence, for she had not the faintest doubt as to the result of that shot. She believed Carl Sherwood slain instantly. She had heard no sound, not even a groan, from his lips after he fell at her feet. Yet she turned, just in time to see the gambler raise upon one elbow and draw a revolver, cocking and turning the muzzle upon Will Avery, who was still ignorant of his danger, for her form was between the two men.

With the quickness of thought Dianthe acted, taking the only course that could have saved the young man from death.

She darted to his side, and flinging her arms around his neck, shielded him with her own body, crying:

"Hold, Carl! Do not shoot, brother, if you love me!"

A hoarse cry of baffled fury escaped the lips of the gambler, as he vainly sought to steady his unnerved hand sufficiently to shoot without endangering the life which had so suddenly grown very dear to him.

"Dog! Cowardly assassin! Put her aside, if there be a single spark of manhood in your carcass!" he snarled, his voice broken with painful gasps. "You took me unawares and shot me down. I may be dying even now, but still you dare not face me, save from shelter of a woman—"

"I will not—you shall not!" gasped Dianthe, clinging more tightly to Avery as he strove to release his neck from her embrace. "Carl—brother Carl! this is all a frightful mistake! I have only found you this night, but I swear to never recognize you again, if harm comes to him—"

Despite her desperate struggles, Will Avery removed her arms, holding both her hands in his powerful grasp, as he stepped aside, fully uncovering himself. Then he said coldly:

"Take your shot—I have had mine. I failed to kill you, and I am not sorry now, since she says that you are her brother. Shoot! What are you waiting for?"

Carl Sherwood had him covered, and it needed but the touch of a trigger to end the matter forever, so far as Will Avery was concerned. But still he hesitated. Those words of Dianthe were ringing in his ears. Her brother? What did she mean? And then, like a flood of light, he divined the truth, and his pistol hand dropped by his side.

Dianthe was right. She had further use for this man. Not only that, but were he slain now, an investigation must follow. A man of his standing could not be killed without the matter being probed to the bottom. At least a portion of the truth must come to the surface, and under the present circumstances it would be dangerous to both him and her to have their past held up in too clear a light.

Her ready wit had convinced Will Avery that the supposed lover was in reality a brother. There could no scandal follow, unless he let his thirst for revenge overcome his prudence.

In his shame at having made such a lamentable mistake, Avery would keep a close tongue between his teeth. If he yielded to Dianthe's imploring command, he would have one more claim upon her, while to ignore it, would make her his enemy.

Then, too, he began to believe that he had not been nearly so badly injured as he had at first believed. He could feel no blood flowing. That horrible numbness was rapidly disappearing, and he was regaining his usual strength and with it his steadiness of nerve.

With the rapidity of lightning, all these reflections flashed across his brain, and his pause was barely perceptible before he answered:

"I do not understand why I have been assaulted, in this fashion, but she pleads for your life, and I will not refuse the very first request made by a sister—"

"I am ready to answer for what I have done, and hide myself behind no one, least of all a woman," moodily retorted the jealous young fellow, when Dianthe checked him.

"Not another word now. See! some one is coming this way. I fear they have heard that shot—quick!" and she leaped to the side of Carl Sherwood, who was painfully dragging himself to his feet, by gripping the door-jamb. "Help me inside with him—I ask it of you as a man, Will Avery!"

He started forward, but Sherwood declined to accept his aid, rising and staggering into the building before he could gain his side. Avery paused, then seemed about to turn away, when Dianthe caught him by the arm and forced him to follow her indoors, closing and locking it behind them.

"You must not go yet!" she said, her face as pale as that of a corpse, though her blue eyes glittered in the lamplight like orbs of polished steel. "You would be seen and questioned as to what had happened. I will not have my name bandied back and forth by the rabble—even though you do think me a woman utterly devoid of shame!"

"I admit my sin," he muttered, with a humble lowering of his proud head. "I beg your pardon. I can do no more than that—save to go away and never pain your eyes with the sight of my face after this night."

Dianthe turned abruptly aside, like one who feared to meet his sad gaze, or one to whom his apologies could make no amends, and touched Carl Sherwood gently on the shoulder.

"You are suffering, brother; let me look at your wound."

There was a peculiar echo in the gambler's voice, as he turned toward her, holding something in his hand.

"I'm afraid I've made a scene, with very little cause, sister mine. See—yonder gentleman has damaged my watch, considerably more than its owner, I find."

He held a heavy gold, hunting-case watch in his hand now battered and marred. It had been struck in the center by a bullet, which now lay against the opposite case, flattened and beaten all out of shape.

"It was a rather lucky escape for me," with a short, hard laugh. "I ordinarily wear this gewgaw in my lower vest pocket, but somehow—why, I don't pretend to know—I must have slipped it back in the upper one. You see—the bullet-hole shows that," and as he spoke he thrust a finger through a rent directly over his heart. "It was well meant, and only for my lucky blunder or absent-mindedness, I would hardly be making this little speech."

"Say providential!" gravely uttered Dianthe. "It has preserved a brother whom I had only found, after many long years of separation. It has saved a very dear friend from murder—though that is a very harsh word—"

"Harder than the deed, sister?" interjected Sherwood.

"Perhaps not—yet I believe there are extenuating circumstances, when all is considered—"

"I beg of you not to trouble yourself by making any defense for my conduct, madam," moodily interposed Avery. "The gentleman has a perfect right to feel aggrieved at the treatment he has this night received at my hands. I can only beg your and his pardon. In addition, as I said before, I am ready and more than ready to stand a shot in return from his pistol, whenever he chooses to claim the forfeit."

"Some day I may remind you of that promise, sir—"

"Stop!" cried Dianthe, her cheeks flushing, her eyes glittering dangerously. "Brother, do not make me regret that I have discovered you, almost before I can realize that fact. This is the gentleman of whom we were speaking. I told you frankly what had passed between us. Unless you have forgotten, you must understand why he was so angry at finding you here, alone with me—"

"I fail to remember that you admitted his right to regulate your private affairs, to say whom you might receive, or whom you must reject from your list of friends and callers. Since I am your brother—and you sought me out and claimed relationship, when I never dreamed that I still had a sister on earth—I claim some rights, even superior to those of a mere acquaintance, which, I believe, is this gentleman's status."

"I ask no favors. I have told you, sir, that I am ready to make what amends you choose to demand. Further than that, I can not go. To you, madam, I only say, pray open the door and let me depart, before I cause still further trouble between you and your brother. I would beg your forgiveness, if I dared, but I know that my sin is too deadly for that. Good-by."

"Not yet! You must stay and listen to what I have to say in explanation of this sad scene. I will not detain you long."

"Mr. Avery, more than once during our brief acquaintance, you have wondered what combination of circumstances could have brought me here, following such an occupation. You did not put the question openly, so I had little difficulty in changing the subject as often as it was introduced, without being forced to gratify your natural curiosity. Not that there was any particular cause for keeping secrecy, but the point was one still painful to me."

"Years ago, when I was a mere child, we all lived together: father, mother, brother and I. But it was not a very happy family circle. There was blame on both sides, no doubt, for all of us were born with hot and hasty tempers, but the end came after a passionate dispute and quarrel, one day, and that night my father left us forever, taking with him my brother."

"Year after year passed by, without our hearing anything of either, though mother, her short-lived passion long since faded away, used every means which lay in her power, to gain some clew to their whereabouts. At last the tidings came, brief as it was terrible."

"Both father and brother were dead—s'ain by Indians, out in the mines! So ran the report, and it seemed to be well grounded, from what particulars we could glean. Mother bore up until the sad truth seemed established beyond a doubt, but then she failed rapidly, accusing herself of being the one most to blame for the terrible ending to a life-trail which had opened under such cheering auspices."

"One day she died, and I was left alone, as I believed, without living relatives in all the wide world. I was not entirely without money, for we had been rich, but there seemed very little left for me until the day when there came a rumor of the remarkable escape from Indians, of two miners whom all their friends had long since given over as dead. A little delay, then the names were given. They were those of my father and my brother!"

"On that day began a long and weary quest, which has only this night found an end. In vain I sought for those escaped captives. No one could tell me where they were, though many assured me that the facts were just as related, that they had been seen and conversed with the men I sought. Beyond that, I could learn nothing."

"I offered rewards, I advertised, I traveled hither and yon, following the faintest shadows in hopes they would prove clews—until my money was gone, leaving me in a strange town,

penniless, without home, kindred or even a friend.

"Only for the firm belief which had not yet left me, of some day finding my lost ones, I might have ended the struggle then and there, but that hope sustained me, and aided me to pass the breakers without being forever wrecked.

"During my wandering search, I had occasion more than once, to enter gaming-halls, and had noticed women among the players, sometimes masked, but oftener openly mingling with the crowd. And I remembered that they were always treated respectfully. It was a choice between two evils, and I chose the least—better than that disgrace and shame!

"I knew something of the games—faro in particular, for my father was a gambler from his birth, and frequently tested the various systems he had invented for the purpose of beating the game, and I asked him many questions. He would explain, and I would try to understand, little thinking how valuable those lessons were to prove for me in the future.

"But why linger? I became a gambler rather than sell my honor. Fortune favored me beyond my wildest hopes. But at the same time, the fever which I inherited from my father, grew in me, until I could not abandon the game. I reasoned that, were either living, I would all the more surely meet with my relatives by running a faro bank—and you see that I was right.

"Last night, I first noticed him—my brother. From the outset, I believed him what he has since proved, though his name was different. But I would not act prematurely. I waited until to-night. I gave him that note, asking him to follow me. He obeyed, and proved himself my long-lost brother. He told me that father was dead, years since.

"Now you know the whole truth. Carl is my brother. He will soon take charge of the Bower for me, until it can be disposed of to advantage, but for the present, none save us three need know of the relationship. There would be too many questions asked, through pure curiosity, and that I detest.

"Brother Carl, your hand. Yours, Mr. Avery—thanks!" and a charming smile lighted up the beautiful face of the gambler queen, as she gently drew the two men nearer each other and joined their hands. "You two are the only friends I have left. You must be friends, too, and as such, I now join your hands. Shake, and in that grip, let all that has happened to awaken evil passions this night, be forgotten forever!"

Without resistance, if also without particular fervor, Sherwood and Will Avery shook hands as commanded, Dianthe smiling upon them like a very angel. Then, as they parted hands, she touched Avery softly on the shoulder, saying:

"If you still consider yourself my debtor, Will, promise me that you will not leave Tombstone until after I have seen you again. Or, better still, I command you to remain! Now—good-night. You, brother, remain for a moment. I have a word to say before we part."

She was opening the door when she uttered these words, one hand still resting on Will's shoulder. She opened the barrier, and he emerged, walking away, his brain dizzy, mazed.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE OLD BOY ON A BENDER.

"EVENIN' gents—hope I see ye!"

The shrill, peculiar voice of the Old Boy of Tombstone rung out without warning, creating quite a sensation in the bar-room of Dianthe's Bower, for just at that moment the principal topic of conversation among those therein congregated, was Professor Joralemon Giltedge Quack, whose sudden and unexplained disappearance from town, called forth sundry remarks the exact reverse of complimentary, from those who had backed him against the noted gambler and sport from up country.

That voice was a magnet to draw every eye toward the entrance, just within which stood the Old Boy, hat far back on the rear of his head, his boyish-looking countenance flushed until it resembled a red rose against a snow-bank, framed as it was by that wealth of milk-white hair.

His long legs were widely separated at the base, and his round, slender body swayed slightly to and fro, until it settled back against the door-jamb. This, with the watery, fishy look in his blue eyes, spoke plainer than words. If not drunk, the Old Boy was well along the trail to that station.

"I 'cept your 'pology, gents—don't git skeered!" he placidly added, with an outward wave of his hand and an effort at a bow, both combining to destroy his balance so far that, to avoid an ignominious fall, he shot forward and brought up against the bar with a force that caused it to quiver throughout its length, and the glasses behind it to jingle musically.

"Airthquake, boys!" he shouted, gripping the counter with frantic energy. "Hang on by your eyewinkers, or it's good-by John! The hull durned shebang's goin'—waal, I ber-durned!" and he stared blankly around at the laugh-

ing crowd. "Look yer, Johnny—tell me honest. Was it a yairthquake, or did some smart cuss tip up the floor, jest to overset me?"

"Tipping did it, no doubt," was the smiling response, "but I reckon your elbow did the most of the work."

"Which goes to say that I'm drunk?"

"Oh, no—just a trifle over the bay," was the hasty amendment. "We all take the trip, occasionally."

"Which I'm durned ef it ain't so!" with a vigorous nod that canted the tall hat far over the speaker's eyes. "I'm on it, bigger'n a wolf, to-night. Drunk tell you cain't rest—but p'izen never made that sort o' drunk come—not much! Good-luck—that's the ticket! Tell the truth an' shame my 'lations, I've bin out on the mount'in tops, studyin' the stars, an' they tole me to mosey back here an' tackle the ontamed tiger in his lair, while the fit was ripe. That I should pull out his eye-teeth, trim his claws an' make him jest everlastin'ly squeal; fer a let-up, while he dragged his tail-feathers in the dust kicked up by the heels o' yours truly, Professor Joralemon Giltedge Quack, the one great an' only 'riginal Old Boy of Tombstone—which is me—gimme drink, Johnny!"

The sudden transition from hyperbole to business seemed inexpressibly ludicrous to the thirsty souls around him, and with merry laughs they formed in line for bar practice, as a matter of course.

With professional skill the barkeeper slung a glass before each man and set out the bottles. Then, when all were filled, the Old Boy gazed blandly around him as one hand slid inside his closely-buttoned coat, reissuing with the tail of a horned toad between his fingers, holding the disgusting creature up before their wondering gaze.

"Thar you see it, gents. Nigh about the only sweet singer which kin live an' grow fat on the sand, prickly p'ar an' hot weather o' this 'ere gelorious kentry—the Arizona canary! You kin find 'em any day an' anywhar—in your boots often es not. Then ungodly men cuss an' smash the innermost critter, little knowin' what a marvelous virtue they is underneath them velvety hide, an' hidden 'mong that horns. But the wise man don't come no monkey tricks like them—not much! He knows by his 'larnin' that with a few o' them delicat birds tucked onder his belt he kin conquer the world, so to speak. That he kin then defy the world, the flesh an' the devil. I don't ax a red cent fur the secret. It ain't patented. You kin try it jest as often as you kin ketch a canary, an' s'arve 'em up the way you fancy 'll taste best. As fer me—"

The old boy of Tombstone dropped the kicking toad into his glass of whisky, then raised it swiftly to his lips and swallowed the contents, smacking his lips audibly, and gazing benevolently over the horrified crowd.

With a moan of agony and despair, one fat bumper doubled up with both hands clasped to his middle, vainly striving to retain the prized liquor, then made a break for the door, followed by more than one of his fellows, all ready to swear that the professor was indeed the Old Boy.

The professor stared after them with wide-open eyes, then shook his head from side to side with a melancholy smile.

"Johnny, you got to fetch on better p'izen then that, or you'll hev the hull town in the horsepittle, sure! When whisky is so mean that it 'll turn stomachs sech as them old soakers tote 'round with 'em, it's nigh about time fur gentlemen to sw'ar off! Take your change out o' that. I'm in a hurry fer to tackle the ontamed tiger—an' here's bettin' a cold million that in less'n a hour you kin hear him yowl clean from here to Denver an' back ag'in!"

One of the men who had just drank at the professor's expense, drew a little nearer and whispered softly:

"He's in thar, boss—Carl Sherwood, you know. He 'nd his mate bin lookin' fer you ever sense with blood in thar eyes an' paws on thar sixes. Better pull out ef your eyes ain't cl'ar an' your narves stiddy."

But his warning, kindly meant, was not heeded, even if heard. The Old Boy seemed to have lost all idea of prudence, and singing at the top of his shrill voice a stanza of "Joe Bowers," he entered the gaming-hall, thumbs thrust under his arm-pits, head thrown back, breast protruded like unto that of an amorous turkey-cock beneath the admiring eyes of his barem, stepping high after the fashion of drunken men who believe themselves sober, his feet pounding the floor in a slow succession of dull thumps.

All eyes were turned in his direction, and among them the dark, glittering orbs of Carl Sherwood, who impulsively rose from the chair in which he had been sitting, one hand dropping upon the revolver beneath his coat.

But this was only for an instant. A slight hiss of warning came from the lips of Dianthe, who was dealing faro, and though the sound passed unnoticed by all others, Sherwood comprehended its meaning, and yielded instant obedience.

"Evenin', gents, an' the same to you, ma'am!" exclaimed the professor, with drunken gravity,

bowing low to Dianthe, and almost pitching on his head as the result of his politeness. "Jest drapped in fer a little tussle with the tiger. Hello! Is it! Durned ef it ain't. My old pard which I skinned the other night! The same which ketched the cholery morgidge an' doubled up like a wet dish-cloth! Back ag'in an' lookin' bright an' chipper as a canary! Lookin' fer the old man, I reckon? Want to git squar', I shouldn't wonder? Waal, I feel sorter kinder somehow that way my own self. On it bigger'n a wolf this evenin'. Kin sling pasteboards, hot lead or cold steel fit to kill! Open for business. Sign out. Pull the bell an' kick on the lower panel—an' you'll hear somethin' drap!"

"If those remarks are addressed to me, sir," said Carl Sherwood, his face white as a sheet, his eyes glowing like living coals, his form quivering with the mad rage which he felt bound in honor to repress, "I have only this to say: My hands are tied for the present, and I have sworn not to enter into a quarrel with any man, unless he opens the ball. Then I'll try to keep my end up level!"

A murmur of surprise ran through the assemblage at this temperate reply to what appeared an unprovoked affront and challenge. Sherwood flushed hotly as he rightly interpreted the meaning of that sound, and he cast an appealing glance into the cold, calm face of the gambler queen. Dianthe shook her head negatively, and he knew that she held him to his promise. For one instant he felt inclined to openly rebel and risk all for the sake of chastising this audacious fellow, whom he had only too good cause for believing was a deadly enemy, bent on his destruction; but then the love-spell, which had so suddenly and completely taken possession of him, reasserted its influence, and he resumed his place at the table.

The Old Boy listened with drunken gravity, nodding his head in grave approval as the gambler ceased speaking.

"That's the way to talk! Ef ye mean whisky, don't say gin. Ef it bothers ye to git away with hot mush, don't snort out that ye kin bite the heads off o' ten-penny nails faster'n a steam shovel kin pitch 'em into your 'tater-trap. Ef you're a p'izen coward, don't advertise that you're the chief o' the town, jest beca'ise it sounds kinder nicer an' more high-toned. I honor ye, stranger, durned ef I don't! Next to the man with a craw chuck full o' sand comes he what ain't got a pesky grain, but is willin' to own up that he's—"

Dianthe saw that the professor was pushing matters too far in his drunkenness. There was a steadily growing fire in Sherwood's eyes that spoke plainly of death, and fearing for the perfect success of her plans should a collision take place, she promptly interfered, emphasizing her words with a cocked and leveled revolver.

"You have shot off your mouth enough for one heat, old gentleman!" her voice ringing out with sharp decision as her blue eyes glanced along the leveled tube. "Give us a rest, or I'll feel obliged to give you one that will last from now to eternity! I never caution but once."

The Old Boy stared at the beautiful speaker in utter amazement, his eyes and mouth gradually opening until they were at full stretch when her concluding sentence was spoken. Then the white teeth clicked together, and the watery blue eyes wandered mournfully over the crowd, returning to the gambler queen in a reproachful stare.

"Waal, I ber—exflunctified! Them cruel speech, an' to me, when I was doin' my level best fer to uphold the reputation o' our natyve town fer cleanin' out all the keerd sharps as come 'long with blood in thar eyes—"

"Enough is quite as good as a feast, old gentleman," impatiently interposed Dianthe, giving the cards a final ripple and slipping them into the dealing-box. "You have had your say-so. Let money talk now, and if you have none to risk on the game, give those a chance who are better heeled."

"You all hear what the lady says, gents! I did 'low to dip lightly an' not take off the gloves fer fear o' bu'stin' the bank wide open, but kin I crawfish now? Ain't I bcun' in honor fer to go in lemons ef I do come out pulp! Betcher sweet life! An' yer's bettin' evens that I make the tiger holler enough an' hunt his hole afore the hour gits gray-headed. Gimme me elbow-room, you little minners, fer the he-old whale o' Arizona is gwine to flipflap his flukes—ugh!"

The Old Boy dropped into a chair with a suddenness and force that drove an explosive grunt from his lungs and tipped the tall hat over his eyes.

"A drunken brute has no business here," said Sherwood, with icy distinctness. "If madam will kindly give me permission, I will take great pleasure in ridding her of any further annoyance from this fellow."

"I can attend to my own affairs, Mr. Sherwood," tartly retorted Dianthe, her eyes flashing with a stern warning. "If the man has gold, I would as soon deal for him as any other. And if he, you, or any other, tries to start a row here, I'll deal after another fashion," she

added, placing a cocked revolver on the board before her. "Make your game, gentlemen!"

"Hol' up, honey—don't crowd the mcurners!" gasped the Old Boy, from under the extinguisher-hat, tugging at a rebellious pocket. "Some ongodly critter hes sewed my weasel-skin fast to my—thar she is!" slapping a plethoric wallet upon the board before him, pushing back his hat, and displaying a wad of bank-notes. "Money talks, you said, ma'am, an' this is what a bit of mine whispers: Even up from cents to millions that I kin call the turn on any keerd you choose to pick out. That I kin name the fust winnin' keerd, an' keep up my lick tell the cows come home. That I kin—"

"Blow harder than a Comstock zephyr—granted!" laughed Dianthe, but adding sharply, "I am dealing the regular game, old gentleman. If you can't confine yourself to that, we will try hard to worry along without your delightful society."

The Old Boy rubbed the tip of his nose, doubtfully, as he stared with watery eyes into the bright, beautiful face opposite, then shook his head mournfully.

"Ef I wasn't so durn nigh drunk, I'd think that was a perlite hint fer me to pull up stakes an' mosey—I would so! An' all fer what? Bec'ase in my ginerosity I wanted to give the tiger one more chance fer to git fat afore I shet up the menadgery! Now I be mad! An' here goes fer b lud!"

With grim resolution, he slapped a silver dollar upon the ace, then stared fixedly at the plump white hands as they manipulated the cards. A few moments, and the ace won. He split the bet, placing the coins on two other cards. Again and again he won, until it really seemed as though he did possess the power he boasted, of telling just how the cards were going to run, for not once during that deal did he lose a stake.

A short, hard laugh parted his lips, as Dianthe shuffled the cards at the end of the deal.

"Mebbe the old man ain't quite so drunk as you reckoned, honey. Ef each one o' them bets was a million, whar'd your tiger be jest now? Flat onto his back, a-hollerin' take him off! An' it would 'a' bin millions, ef I wanted to make money. But I don't. I'm too rich a'ready. Got more'n I know what to do with now. Jest drapped in to show you, ma'am, an' these gents, what a man o' science could do ef he tuck a notion. Don't want to spile the fun, an' ef you'll own up that I'm too chuck full o' luck fer your capital, I'll draw out an' give the rest o' the pilgrims a show—"

Dianthe seemed nettled by his patronizing tone, and her voice sounded hard as she said:

"Gentlemen, I suspend the rules for to-night. As for y u, sir, now's the time to make your boasts good. There is no longer a limit. The bank will stand whatever bets you choose to make—only let your money do the talking."

"Bu-ness in a minnit! whooray! Thar she opens!" and he dropped a bank-note upon the table. "Luck forever! Whar she draps, thar she goes. Three oughts on every bet—that's me."

A little buzzing sound came from the spectators, for they could see that the bill was one of a thousand dollars. And this buzz grew more emphatic as, at the third turn, the Old Boy won his wager.

"A horn-toad fer luck, an' the Old Boy to crowd it up to the last notch!" laughed the professor, raking down his winnings, then holding the bill at arm's length above the board, letting it float around in little circles until it dropped upon the ten-spot. "All set; go on with the music!"

The queer talk, queerer actions, and strange luck of the drunken man held the crowd spell bound, and not one among them noticed a tall form which had just entered the room.

Pale and haggard, as though just recovering from a fit of severe illness, Peter Papagon moved silently toward the table, his eyes filled with a dangerous light, one hand held behind him, until he paused only a few feet from the garrulous professor. Then—his arm shot out, claspng a revolver, aimed directly at the head of the man who had made him the laughing-stock of the town.

At that instant Dianthe beheld the giant, and leaped to one side with a little shriek. The weapon exploded—the head of the Old Boy ducked forward until it struck the table.

As swiftly it flew back again. The chair in which he sat was overturned. His black-gaitered feet flashed through the air, striking the giant full in the breast, with such force that he was hurled to the floor, and the next moment he was staring full into the muzzle of a cocked revolver, held by the Old Boy of Tombstone.

"Peter Popgun, you're too durn keardless to live!" shrilled that peculiar voice. "Some o' these days you'll be burtin' somebody, ef the good Lawd an' me lets you live long enough."

"Kill me, or I'll kill you!" snarled the overthrown giant as he snatched a second pistol from his belt.

Before he could raise the hammer there came an explosion and the weapon was torn from his

benumbed fingers. And the Old Boy glared through the blue smoke with eyes which seemed on fire. Peter shut his eyes and drooped his head, shivering in every fiber, striving to resist that terrible influence, but in vain. Those dreadful eyes pierced him through and through. He groaned aloud in his agony of mind and soul, but he could not shatter the spell which was fast binding him.

"Peter, git up an' 'knowledge that you're a pizen idjit!" uttered the Old Boy, his voice stern and icy-cold. "Stan' up, toes out, an' han's in persish. Make a bow. Tell these people that you was crazy, an' didn't know what you was doin'."

Slowly, stiffly, the giant obeyed. Once more he was an automaton, so far as self-will was concerned.

"Good boy, Peter!" encouragingly remarked the professor. "You shell hev a lump o' sugar afore you go to your little bed, so you shell! Now, honey, tell pappy what made you act a blamed fool like that? Who sot you ag'inst the old man?"

"You bin makin' a durned fool o' me. You set me to playin' dirty tricks. You made me kiss a bummer an' call him my darlin' Nancy. You made me chaw rotten aigs!" and the poor fellow clasped both huge hands over his outraged stomach.

"Who told you all them things, Peter?"

"A man. I don't know his name," slowly, painfully.

"Look around the room an' see ef you kin see him here. Take your time. Don't make no mistake. Kin you find him?"

"Thar he is!" and Peter pointed to Carl Sherwood.

"It's a lie!" cried the gambler, hotly, his eyes flashing.

The Old Boy turned upon him quickly, all traces of drunkenness vanishing as by magic, his eyes glittering, his voice ringing out clear and distinct as he uttered the words:

"Did you mean Peter or me, Mr. Sherwood?"

The gambler flashed a swift glance into the face of Dianthe, who had resumed her seat. That glance was full of eloquent pleading, but Dianthe only drooped her eyes and gave a barely perceptible shake of the head in denial.

"I meant that overgrown idiot and liar!" snapped Carl. "I never spoke to him in my life, save in your presence, night before last, out yonder in the bar-room."

The lips of the Old Boy parted to speak, but what he intended saying can only be conjectured, for at that moment came a startling interruption from the outside of the Bower.

Wild yelling and shouting, the confused trampling of many hoofs in rapid gallop, were mingled with the swift explosions of firearms and the jingle of breaking glass.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE RAID OF THE RUSTLERS.

Up from the lower level of the sandy desert, rode a band of horsemen on that night, the bright moonlight reflected from the metal butts of weapons which constant use kept highly polished. Swiftly they came, without sound or cry, until the edge of the little mining-camp was reached. Then they drew rein and crowded close around the one who appeared to be acting as leader. Apparently he was a man of few words, for his speech was brief and to the point.

"Talk's cheap, but it takes money to buy whisky, boys! You know what we're here for. If we don't take the town, the town'll take us! Cut loose and wade in!"

With a yell so shrill and sharp that it thrilled through the far-away mountains like the angry yowl of a famishing panther, he plunged his spurs rowel deep into the flanks of his snorting horse, and darted forward at the head of his men, revolver in hand, sending bullet after bullet through such windows as were displayed by the lights within. Close at his heels came the others, a full score in all, copying his actions to the best of their ability, sending leaden hail in all directions, unheeding or glorying in the wild shrieks and angry curses which marked their course.

Who and what were these wild riders? Cowboys? So the hasty-speaking observer might reply, but they would have been only partly right.

They had, no doubt, taken their first degree in that little army of bold men, whose broad shoulders have been made to bear the burden of many a sin which by rights belongs elsewhere. But now, they had been kicked out, or had taken a separate trail of their own, and gloried in the title of "Rustlers."

What Quantrell's men were to the Confederate rank and file, the "Rustler" is to the cowboy proper. With rare exceptions, to him should be attributed the bloody deeds of reckless daring on which our newspapers so often dilate.

Tombstone and vicinity has been cursed ever since its opening, with a numerous gang of Rustlers. In those infant days, the nearest law-mill was at Tucson, seventy-five miles away. To arrest a criminal was perilous enough in itself. To take him to Tucson through the wilds where his fellows were to be met with at

every turn, was still more so. And when the gantlet was run successfully, the odds were in favor of his being turned loose again to "get even" with his persecutors.

That this is plain fact, a glance at the records concerning the notorious "Curly Bill" is ample evidence.

The "Rustler" generally carries a brace of ugly-looking knives, and from two to half a dozen revolvers on his person, any and all of which he is only too ready to use. He has backers in plenty, as ready to fight as eat or drink, and in the case now under consideration, he and his comrades formed a large band of desperadoes whose rendezvous was in the San Simon valley, where no man who valued his life dare venture unless in sympathy with them. Large herds of stolen horses and other stock were secreted by them in the mountain canyons and gulches, to be, in the course of time, run over the border and sold.

Such, in brief, was the party who now dashed at speed into Tombstone, with the expressed intention of "taking the town."

Still in the lead, the chief of the Rustlers wrenched his mustang's head around as he came opposite the brilliantly lighted front of Dianthe's Bower, replacing his empty revolver by one with cylinders full. One more shrill yell, and he sent the mustang straight for the swinging door, through which he dashed like a human catapult, reining in with the breast of his snorting, trembling, yet obedient steed, fairly touching the bar.

"Good-evening, Johnny!" he cried, leaving the saddle as though violently thrown therefrom by the sudden check, yet alighting on his feet behind the bar and knocking the bewildered keeper down with a swinging blow of the clubbed pistol.

Knocked to the floor, with his ribs crushed to a bloody pulp beneath the iron-shod hoofs, lay one of the men who had not time to get out of the way. There were half a dozen others in the room, but not one thought of drawing weapon when the wild rider plunged into their midst, all scattering and seeking safety in flight, some rushing into the gaming-room, others trying to flee from the building, only to be met at the door by the Rustlers and knocked back with clubbed pistols or still more certainly disposed of by cruel knives.

With his shrill, mocking laugh, the chief, tall, supple, handsome after a cruel fashion, knocked the neck off of a bottle and emptied the contents into a punch-bowl, which he drained at a swallow, then leaped back upon the bar, yelling:

"Open house, boys—help yourselves!"

Into the saddle he dropped, light as a panther, then urged his mustang through the opening into the gambling-hall, where all was confusion most intense.

When that wild uproar first broke upon the inmates of Dianthe's Bower, it seemed to cast a spell over all present. From bitter experience many of them knew what was coming. They had no acknowledged leader, and seemed literally unable to do aught save wait and listen and hope that the wild riders would content themselves with racing through the town. Not one among them all dreamed of a raid like this, and their confusion was worse confounded when they heard the crash of hoofs upon the bar-room floor.

Into the center of the room plunged the mustang, then dropping back on its haunches, as the mad rider threw back his head, jerking upon the reins which he gripped between his strong white teeth, for each hand was filled with a cocked revolver, covering the startled congregation.

"Hands up and fingers straight, pards, or down goes your meat-houses!" cried the chief of the Rustlers, dropping the reins from his teeth and smiling like an angel upon the white and startled faces before him. "I'm a blessed cherubim when I ain't crossed, but if you want to enjoy a holy picnic, just try to chip in before I've got my bets placed! Hol' mates! waltz along this trail, and look out for a stampede!"

In obedience to his call, the Rustlers rushed in from the bar-room, one hand of each grasping a pistol, the other clutching a beheaded bottle of liquor, equally ready to drink or fight, just as the circumstances demanded.

Pale as a spirit, yet betraying not the slightest trace of fear, Dianthe rose from her chair and confronted the chief.

"What is your business here, sir? This is my place of business, and not a circus ring. You have mistaken the place. Oblige me by going out as you came, or you'll get hurt!"

The smile faded from his reckless, handsome countenance. A look of admiration, not unmixed with wonder, came into his dark eyes. Until now he had not noticed the gambler queen, giving his attention wholly to the men present, ready to anticipate and foil any desperate attempt upon his life. An attack of this nature was unexpected, and for a moment he seemed confused, at a loss what to say or do. Only for a moment, however, then he doffed his slouch hat and bowed almost to the saddle-bow.

"Pardon, lady—but business is business! I've

made a wager that I would break the Bower bank this night, or leave this world of bliss forever! Do me justice to believe that I was ignorant that you owned the place. If I had, the bet would never have been made. As it is, I can't take water—"

"Then take lead!" cried Dianthe, swiftly raising one white hand and firing a shot from her revolver.

Swift as was her action, the chief of the Rustlers was not to be caught napping. Ducking his head, he leaned far over to the right, and the bullet whistled harmlessly on to spend its force on the wall beyond.

Still more rapid was his action in regaining the perpendicular attitude of a breath before, and a touch of the bloody spur sent his mustang forward, he crying out:

"Horse and rider that the queen of hearts wins the next turn! Up, you cursed brute! Wnoo-oop!"

One frantic plunge forward under the comb of stimuluses of voice, hand and heel—then the snorting mustang rose in the air, as active as a cat, and with a mighty leap, alighted fairly in the center of the faro table.

Once more the life of the reckless chief of Rustlers was saved almost as by a miracle, for Will Avery sent a bullet whizzing at his brain, just as that wild feat was essayed, knocking off the slouch hat without breaking skin.

He paused not for a second shot—did not even stop to see whether or no his first had proved as fatal as he intended—but leaped across the table and flung a protecting arm around the gambler queen, his overpowering love showing in every line of his honest countenance. Scarce in time.

His arm had hardly encircled the trim waist, when the Rustler chief leaped his horse upon the table, which went to pieces beneath the shock. Horse and rider fell in a confused heap. Dianthe and Will Avery were also brought to the floor, the one with an involuntary cry of fear, the other with a curse of furious anger, as he strove to arise, only to be again felled by the struggling mustang.

At the first onset of the Rustlers, the players around the table had abandoned their chairs and scattered in confusion, the majority thinking only of saving their own skins.

Of them all, Peter Papagon was unmoved by either fear, anger, or other emotion. Stiff as a stock, he stood where the magnetic gaze of the Old Boy of Tombstone had riveted him, not even turning his eyes toward the mad rider when he came plunging into the room, when the shots were fired, nor when the table went to splinters under the iron-shod hoofs. All these were as nothing to him. He could hear only the voice of his master, when it was addressing him.

At the moment when Will Avery fired at the chief of the Rustlers, the Old Boy was just covering the desperado. He saw the hat fly off, and believed that the daring rascal had received his death wound. He heard the mad yell of vengeance which burst from the lips of the Rustlers—saw them fling aside their bottles and raise their revolvers—and then his black-gloved hands came out in line, each one clasp ing a pistol, from the muzzles of which it seemed as though a constant flame was streaming, so swiftly were the weapons worked.

"Whooray, white men!" his shrill voice rent the air, high above the wild and confusing tumult. "Clean out the pizen skunks! Don't let any one git away to tell the tale! Sock it to 'em! Pump in the lead! Polish your knives on thar lean ribs! Cut an' slash—shoot an' smash—oh—"

Carl Sherwood also hastily abandoned his position close to the faro-table when the chief of the Rustlers dashed into the room, but there was little trace of fear in his dark countenance as he drew a revolver and stood on guard.

A grating curse broke from his lips as he beheld the admiring gaze of the outlaw when Dianthe so boldly accosted him. Another found birth as the gambler queen fired the shot which he knew must prove the signal for death and bloodshed.

Like that of the Old Boy, his pistol covered the daring chief as he dashed at the table, but unlike him, he saw that the fellow had escaped unscathed, and just as the mustang alighted upon the table, he pulled trigger.

Down went horse and rider, but Sherwood felt, rather than heard, amid that crash, that his weapon had hung fire just a trifle—yet enough to save the life of the desperado.

He saw the man clear himself from the wreck, and rise upright. He fired again, and his white teeth showed themselves in a wolfish snarl as the chief of the Rustlers went down once more, almost on top of Dianthe and Will Avery.

He felt that the outlaw was effectually disposed of, and turned to where the Old Boy was shouting forth his wild slogan, dropping an enemy at almost every shot. He saw that all around him was confusion, that there were none to note his actions who would be likely to remember them in the days to come, and leaping with the agile ease of a panther to the rear of the professor, clubbed his pistol and dealt him a terrible blow on the back of the head.

With only that gasping exclamation, the Old Boy of Tombstone sunk in his tracks, not a limb quivering.

A moment later, Carl Sherwood staggered back, clapping both hands to his face, as a bullet swept across the bridge of his nose, breaking the skin and causing him to believe both of his eyes had been destroyed, the pain was so intense.

Only for that, he might have seen the chief of the Rustlers scramble to his feet, as yet untouched by the lead of his foes, having been overthrown by the mad lunging out of his crippled mustang.

Just before him he beheld Dianthe, struggling to rise, a fragment of the splintered table pinning her dress to the floor. Even in that moment of terror, she was lovely as an angel in his eyes, and he swooped down upon her, one arm winding around her waist as the other tore her dress from the fragment, and lifting her from the floor, he yelled:

"Beauty for me—booty for you, boys! Clean out the ranch, and give those fools who try to make trouble, a bloody grave or a coyote feast! Wade in, you tiger-cats!"

Dianthe struggled to escape from his arms, but her powers were too greatly weakened by the shock she had received, and realizing this, she caught at a pistol which still hung in its scabbard at the ruffian's hip, jerking forth the weapon, but before she could raise the hammer, her wrist was encircled as by a vise, and the weapon wrested away so forcibly that a cry of pain was forced from her pale lips.

"Help! brother—save me from this demon! God of mercy! is there no one to hear and answer my cry?" she shrieked, her magnificent courage at last broken down.

The Old Boy was lying in a fast-growing pool of his own blood. Carl Sherwood was reeling back against the wall, his fingers growing red with the blood that came from what he believed was his death-wound. The rest of the citizens were cowering in the corners, trying to crawl through the small windows, or else lying in death or death-agony, where the fast-flying bullets of the Rustlers dropped them.

No, not all! One voice heard and answered her—the voice of Will Avery, who had been lying where hurled by the furious lashing out of the crippled mustang like one dead. That voice brought back his senses, and he staggered to his feet reeling forward as he cried:

"Hound—devil—release that lady—"

The chief of the Rustlers heard that hoarse command, and wheeling, flung up his pistol hand. Dianthe tried to strike it aside, but she was too late. The weapon exploded, and poor Will Avery dropped to the floor, gasping:

"My God—Dianthe—my love—"

A laugh which was fairly satanic in its brutality broke from the ruffian's lips as he cocked his revolver once more and sent a second bullet into the quivering, gasping form, to make sure that his work was well done.

So sure was he that this was the case, that he raised Dianthe from the floor and started toward the door—only to hear a warning cry from one of his men, and wheel to behold Will Avery leaping upon him like a cub-robbed tiger, a glittering bowie-shaped blade in his uplifted hand.

He had just time to throw forward his pistol and fire one shot. Even then he could see that it struck fair in the center of the young miner's chest—but a cry of horror escaped his lips as he saw the man still coming—still—

An iron grip closed upon his throat, tearing and working as though flesh and bone would be crushed to a pulp. The flashing blade rose and fell—cutting down through the clothes, flesh and bone, only checked by the curved guard striking against the breast-bone, its point cleaving that black heart in twain!

The gambler queen felt herself torn from the quivering embrace of the death-stricken Rustler, heard the faint words:

"Dianthe—my love—save or die—"

The rescuing arms lost their power to sustain her form, and they fell to the floor, side by side, just as the lights dropped from their fastenings with a crash, casting all into complete darkness.

CHAPTER XIX.

PETER POGUN AND HIS CHARMER.

"No you won't do it, Nancy! Not when I ax it onto my knees, 'umble as a pore critter kin!"

"No, sir—not for you nor no other man will I fling a sure enough good thing over my shoulder; and all for what? You say, Peter, for fear my tongue might run too far and cut too deep for your comfort?"

A nimble tongue it was, too, and one that cut sharply enough, even while expressing that fear, and Peter Papagon bent over on his low stool until his elbows rested upon his knees, joined palms supporting his chin, while his big, blue eyes gloomily traced the course of the little stream of dirty soap suds which started from the base of the steaming tub, and wound here and there over the irregular floor, until an exit was found near the open door.

Nancy Topack took her hands from the water, shook off the superfluous drops, then pushed

back a stray curl of black hair that persisted in falling down over her eyes, using an elbow in preference to the soapy extremity.

A trim, snug-built little woman was Nancy. Not exactly lovely, perhaps. Her features were a trifle too sharply cut for that. Her hair black as jet, wavy, crimped, which she vainly strove to keep in close confinement. Her eyes of the same hue, medium in size, but brilliant and full of "snap." Her nose slightly curved, her mouth very small, lips thin, but red as though painted, and forming a perfect cupid's bow, inclosing small, white, even teeth. Her form rounded and well-shaped, lithe as that of a panther; her motions quick and decisive, somehow reminding one of a bundle of steel springs wrapped up in a very neat covering of flesh and blood.

Such was Nancy Topack, sole laundress of Tombstone at the date treated of. Nancy Topack, the lode-star of poor, luckless Peter Papagon's existence.

"I don't want to be too hard on you, Peter," said Nancy, in a softer, more amiable tone. "But when you talk like a fool, I can't help telling you so. Wouldn't I be as big a cne, to do as you beg—throw up a sure and certain thing here, when I am steadily laying by money, day after day—"

"Money ain't all, Nancy," muttered Peter, gloomily.

Nancy gave her parboiled hands a hasty wipe on her big apron, then drew a stool directly in front of the despondent giant, perching herself upon it, unconsciously copying his attitude; then demanding:

"Peter, I've heard you say that before. And when I asked you what it meant, you spoke of your love and affection. It flattered me, then, and made me feel like a silly little goose. I like to hear it, even now, though I know how little it is worth, when you come to weigh it against common sense—"

"Nancy, how kin you?" with a reproachful gaze.

"Peter, I'm goin' on twenty-nine years old. You're nigh forty. Old enough, both, to talk sober sense; an' I'm goin' to."

"When I first met you, I said 'way down in my heart, there is a man a woman could learn to love and trust. You had as good an opinion of me, for I could see as much in your honest blue eyes. In two days I knew all about you, and did not drive you away with the others who wanted to come courtin'. You know that, Peter."

"You was a angel, an' me a durn fool!" groaned Peter.

"Not quite one, nor yet the other," steadily. "But you are not now what you were then. Peter, what on airth has got into you, anyway?" and Nancy grabbed the giant by the bushy forelock, pushing his head back so that his eyes were forced to encounter her steady, searching gaze.

"The devil, Nancy; jest that an' no less!" desperately responded the giant. "That's why I want you to pack up an' leave this place with me. Long's I stay here whar that pizen critter is, jest so long will I be—"

"Wait a bit, Peter. What critter do you mean?"

"The Old Boy—the devil—him as makes me cut up all these durned fool tricks, an' eat rotten aigs—a-agh!"

Nancy's fingers closed tighter, while her other hand, with forefinger uplifted, quivered in front of his bullet-scarred nose-tip.

"Peter, you never told me that; you've been up to some more of your shameful didoes! For all your sacred promises, you have been disgracing yourself and me again. I know it!"

"I ain't—or ef I hev, how could I help it?" desperately spluttered the giant. "You don't know that pizen critter, with his turrible look; it goes right through ye like a buzz saw! It turns your blood to ice, an' you feel like you was dyin'—feel as though your speret hed jumped out o' your skin an' was floatin' round loose, ready fer to go whar an' do what he tells ye—"

"Feel just as though you were drunk!" snapped Nancy, releasing her grasp and moving her stool back with a spiteful jerk. "Nedn't tell me, Peter Papagon! The age of miracles is past and gone. No man can exert any such terrible power over another in these days—"

"Nancy, they kin—hey do!" exclaimed the giant with desperate emphasis, that carried a conviction of truth with it. "You don't know the man—ef he is a man. He says he's the Old Boy, an' I b'lieve he says true. Ef he wasn't somethin' more than a common human, could he turn an' twist me inside out as he hes done? Could he make me git up an' stan' onto my head in a bar-room fer the crowd to laugh at? Could he make me bug an' kiss a dirty, greasy, bloated bumner, an' call him my darlin' Nancy—"

"You Peter!" screamed Nancy, stamping her little foot.

"I can't help it, Nancy—it's a scan'alous fact!" muttered Papagon, staring moodily at the floor. "I know he made me do all that, though I didn't know it then—"

"And you come here and tell me—you left him and those other brutes to laugh over the

shame and disgrace you cast upon me—the woman you pretended to love—”

Her voice choked, and she covered her burning face with both hands. Peter, sobbing, spluttering, fell upon his knees before her and sought to clasp her waist with one arm, while removing her hands with his huge paw—only to have a swift succession of blows fall upon his ears.

“How dare you, sir!” the little spit-fire flashed, stamping her foot as she stood before him, her eyes blazing. “How dare you touch me, and those men laughing at us both—that scoundrel still alive to boast of his—his—oh, oh—”

A flood of tears checked the passionate speech, and drawing back, Peter gazed sadly down upon her. As suddenly as the flood had broken forth, it subsided, and Nancy looked up.

“Well, what have you got to say for yourself, sir?”

“What kin I say, Nancy?”

“That you will avenge me and yourself on that man—”

“He ain’t a man, Nancy. He’s the devil!”

“Man or demon, he has bitterly insulted me!” flashed the little woman. “If you are a man, you will call him to account. If not—then good-by! And when I say that, it means forever!”

“Nancy, see here,” said Peter, slowly. “The minnit I found out what hed happened, an’ knowed who it was that made me play all them dirty tricks, I sot out to hunt him up. I couldn’t find him ontel last night. You know I ain’t a coward—or wasn’t, afore he sot his evil eye onto me—but I was afeared to meet him face to face, when he hed time to look straight at me with them eyes. But I swore I’d kill him fer insultin’ you, an’ I did my level best.”

“Peter! what do you mean?”

“Wait, Nancy. I found him at the Bower, last night. I pulled a six an’ crep’ up ahind him. Nobody noticed me. I stuck the muzzle plum ag’in his skull, an’ pulled trigger.”

“You—you didn’t murder him, Peter?” in horror.

“Ef you call it murder, I tried my level best. Any man would never ‘a’ kicked, after that shot. But him; he jest turned a back somersault an’ driv his hoof into my stomach, keelin’ me over like a log. I tried to shoot ag’in, but he knocked the six out o’ my hand with a bullet. An’ then he ketched my eye with his’n, an’ I can’t say no more. I felt that deadly cold creepin’ through my veins—nothin’ more!”

“What broke the spell, Peter?” whispered Nancy, after a brief pause. “What become of him?”

“I don’t know—to both axin’s,” was the gloomy response. “When I got back my senses it was broad daylight, an’ I was at home in my bunk. How I got out o’ the Bower, or how it come that I didn’t get hurt in the row there, is more’n I kin even guess.”

“I heard it all—though I little thought that you were in the midst of it, Peter,” and Nancy crept closer to the giant, not shrinking away from the big hand that stole cautiously around her trim waist. “They say it was a terrible affair—that an awful lot were killed and hurt.”

“It was so. More’n a dozen boys laid out fer the grave. I jest come from thar, when I drapped in to see you. I was in hopes that I’d find him among ‘em—but no sech good luck. Many a better lad lay thar—‘mong ‘em pore Will Avery, who they do say showed most remarkable grit in savin’ Miss Di from the grip o’ the hell hounds who was bent on kerryin’ of her away with ‘em. Shot all to pieces. Cain’t live the day out, the doctors say. Pore feller!”

“Miss Di took him home with her, I heard?”

“Why shouldn’t he go thar? Didn’t he throw away his life to save her? He ain’t got a ‘lotion in the land. I honor her for doin’ of it, though it ain’t no more’n what’s right.”

For a few moments there was silence. Then Peter said:

“Now you know why I wanted you to give up this place an’ go away with me, Nancy. You know I love you. You know that I’ll never let you want while I kin strike a honest lick. You know what that devil is—how he kin make a blame fool o’ me whenever he tries. He wasn’t killed last night, or I’d ‘a’ found his body. He’ll come back—”

“Suppose he does?” flashed Nancy. “Peter, I can never love a coward. I don’t say that you are one, but there must be something wrong when you let a man run over you like that. Fight him—resist him—refuse to yield when he tries to put that spell on you again. You can do it if you will. Think of me—say that it was to win my love—and Peter—”

She hesitated, her eyes cast one shy glance into his, then drooped, and her fingers nervously plucked at her wet apron.

“Well, Nancy?” whispered Peter, giving her a little hug.

“Do it, Peter—and I’ll give you a big kiss and a good bug every time you foil the rascal—now then!” she uttered, with desperate energy, looking him boldly in the face, though her cheeks grew crimson with the effort.

“You—you don’t mean it, Nancy?” the giant gasped.

“Try me and see, Peter!” softly.

“I will—durned ef I don’t! But,” and his beaming face grew clouded again, “s’pose he never turns up ag’in? He ain’t in town, fer I looked an’ as’t all over. S’pose he’s gone fer good an’ all?”

“Then we’ll have one trouble less in this world, and you’ll be content to work on as before, living in hopes of the good time when we will have money enough put by to justify us in going back to the old home and settling down in life,” softly murmured Nancy, her bright eyes softened, her face really beautiful.

“Yes, I know, but—” hesitated Peter, unconsciously moistening his lips as he looked longingly down upon that little, cherry-red mouth.

A low, musical laugh, a shy, upward glance, then a whisper:

“Peter, if you promise faithfully to resist the—that man, I don’t know but I would be willing to pay.”

“Nancy, you don’t mean it?” gasped the giant.

“Just a little one, on your promise to fight—”

She paused abruptly, with a wondering cry, for she saw a strange look of horror stealing into the honest face, into the widely-opening blue eyes. She felt the muscles in those mighty arms growing stiff, but it was not in an embrace. Instead, his fervent grasp relaxed, and he started to arise.

“Peter, what is the matter?” she cried, in alarm.

“That—that devil—he’s calling me.”

“Fight him—resist him—remember your promise, oh, love Peter! Look at me! Listen to Nancy, your Nancy!”

“I—I can’t!” huskily gasped the giant, arising to his feet, with a strangely stiff series of motions. “I’m comin’, boss—I’m comin’!”

“No, Peter, you sha’n’t go! I won’t let you!” cried the little woman, springing up and winding her arms around his neck, pressing her lips to his with frantic energy. “Peter, wake up! Are you mad? Have you forgotten your promise?”

“Comin’, boss, as quick as I kin!” muttered the giant, lost to all save a sense of being called by one whom he had no power to disobey, unconscious of the little woman who was fighting so desperately to break the evil spell, knowing nothing of the passionate kisses which she was showering upon his unanswering lips, though only a minute ago he would have counted them cheap at the price of his life.

“Peter, my love—you brute!” cried Nancy, bursting into hysterical tears, as the giant walked to the door as though nothing immedd him. “If kisses won’t wake you, take that!”

She slapped and clawed him, but with no better success. Peter still strode on out of the door, and the poor little woman fell upon the threshold, sobbing as though her heart would break, unable to continue that unequal struggle.

CHAPTER XX.

THE OLD BOY IN BONDS.

THE Old Boy of Tombstone was knocked senseless by that treacherous blow from behind, falling like a log, the brace of revolvers dropping from his nerveless fingers, and he saw nothing, knew nothing of the thrilling events which followed in such swift succession, culminating in the fall of the two huge chandeliers and total eclipse of their lights, plunging everything there into darkness the most intense.

He knew not that at that very instant a stout pair of hands closed upon his throat, gripping it savagely until their owner felt satisfied that he was beyond the power of further resistance, then running down his body until they met around his waist. A mighty heave, then the limp, nerveless body was raised from the floor and cast across a pair of broad shoulders. A cry which sounded doubly loud as it broke the deadly silence which had fallen over all on the fall of the chandeliers—a united rush of the Rustlers to the bar-room, out into the night, into the saddle and down the street, where armed and angry citizens were beginning to make their appearance—a shot or two—then a mad gallop over the desert.

On through the night, until the mad raiders were satisfied that none of the Tombstoneites contemplated immediate pursuit, then the man across whose cantle hung the black-garbed figure, called a halt.

One of the loose horses, which had borne a living rider into Tombstone, but would never more feel the pressure of his knees, was caught and into the saddle was strapped the form of the Old Boy, placed astride, his feet being tied beneath the horse’s belly, and a lasso passed twice around his waist, the ends being held by two of the Rustlers.

On once more the mad riders sped, their captive looking more like dead than living, his head drooping upon his chest, his face marked with streaks of blood.

Mile after mile was cast behind them. The desert was left, and their course wound through the hills, the canyons and gulches, where the declining moon cast little light, where their nimble and sure-footed mustangs were forced to proceed cautiously, where the keenest eye of

sharpest scout would be troubled to pick up their trail even beneath the broad light of the noonday sun. On and still on, until the night had grown old; then they came to a halt in a secluded little valley amid the frowning rock-hills, and the Old Boy of Tombstone was cut loose from the saddle and roughly dumped upon the ground. But a strong hand gripped him tightly, as though fearful of escape, and a warning voice hissed in his ear:

“None o’ your durn foolishin’, now, ‘less ye want to lose the bull top o’ your cabeza! You hear me whisper!”

No answer—not the faintest sign that the words were heard, and the curse which hissed through the fellow’s teeth told of a growing uneasiness, as he again raised the body in his strong arms and bore it back to where the little valley ended in an almost perpendicular rock-wall.

A sharp whistle brought one of the Rustlers to his side.

“Kin’le a fire—in a hurry, too! I begin to b’lieve the p’izen critter hes kicked the bucket fer good this deal, but I ain’t takin’ no chances on it. Start a light, an’ I’ll keep a six at his ear. Ef he’s croaked, the boss’ll raise h—!”

“He can’t blame anybody but himself, then!” was the sullen response, as the man set about kindling a fire. “He knocked him over—pity he didn’t strike before the old villain keeled over so many of the boys—”

“Bite it off, boy, and swallow the rest,” growled the first speaker, sharply. “No need to tell more’n you know.”

The fire of dried sage-brush blazed up brightly, and the Rustler retreated with a grumbling snarl. The other man peered down into the face of his captive, starting back quickly as he met the big blue eyes staring into his, seemingly afire.

“Come to life ag’in, hev ye?” he said, with a half-chuckle, as he covered the Old Boy with his pistol. “Thought ye’d jumped over the range, sure enough! Glac ye hain’t—glad you kin see an’ feel an’—Durn them goggle eyes!”

The eyes seemed to increase in size, to protrude until it appeared as though they must burst from their ligaments and roll down the ashen-white cheeks. From glowing, they began to blaze. They seemed to be filled with molten metal at a white heat. The old man shrunk away, but only for a moment.

The Old Boy of Tombstone had exerted his utmost powers, but in vain. This stolid brute had not brain enough for him to work upon. He was proof against mesmerism.

“So it’s you, Dan Abbles!” exclaimed the professor, showing no signs of disappointment at his utter failure.

“Yas, it’s me Dan Abbles!” snapped the ruffian. “I tole ye the other night that I would git even with you. I’m a man what never goes back onto his word. I’ve got ye now, tight as a nut! I’m goin’ to keep ye too—”

“Until your boss comes after me—eb, Daniel?”

“Your tongue’s too durn loose!” Hello—boys. Some o’ ye waltz this way fer a bit—Not much ye don’t, honey,” he snarled, leaping forward and striking the Old Boy down with a heavy blow, as that worthy sought to leap to his feet.

The Rustlers came with a rush in answer to the call, and, despite the struggles which Professor Quack persisted in, he was quickly bound hand and foot, and a thick cloth tied over his eyes.

“That’ll do, boys; I’ll ‘tend to the gent fer the rest,” said Dan Abbles, propping his captive up against the rock wall, when all these precautions were taken.

The Rustlers turned away, and the ruffian continued:

“You cain’t make no sech durn fool o’ me as you did o’ that softy, Pete Popgun, but all the same I ain’t goin’ fer to hev ye workin’ them cussed head-lights o’ yourn onto this rooster! I’m goin’ to squat down afore ye an’ keep watch. Ef you try any tricks I’ll lend you one over the cabeza. ‘Have yourself, an’ nobody shain’t hurt ye—tell the boss comes!’”

“Carl Sherwood, I reckon you mean?” asked the prisoner, but there was no answer, though he repeated the words, and feeling that Dan Abbles was resolved to hold no further converse, Professor Quack likewise subsided into silence.

But if his tongue was idle his brain was busy enough. That question had not been put because he deemed any answer necessary, but by holding the gambler in conversation he hoped to bring him under that strange, magnetic influence, and through its agency effect his escape. If done at all, it must be before Carl Sherwood came; on that point he felt assured.

He had shown his hand too plainly, perhaps, never dreaming of a turn like this. Sherwood knew that he was an enemy of some sort, though the strange events which had marked their intercourse while in Tombstone might well have blinded him to the exact truth. Either accident or a cunningly-laid plan had placed that enemy in his power. He would lose little time in seeking out the truth. Then, whether he failed or not, he would strike hard and sure.

Not an agreeable prospect, but the Old Boy

of Tombstone made the best of it, and after satisfying himself that, without the aid of his eyes, he could do nothing with Dan Abbles, he resigned himself to the inevitable and fell asleep.

He was awakened when the day dawned, and given some bacon and crackers, Abbles releasing his hands so that he could feed himself, but keeping the bandage over his eyes and holding a revolver at his ear. Then he was rebound and left alone until noon, when the same performance was gone through with.

An hour later he caught the quick clatter of a horse's hoofs upon the flinty soil, then the rapid footfalls of a man, and, as the bandage was stripped from his eyes, he beheld before him Carl Sherwood.

"You've bin a monstrous long time comin', honey!" he exclaimed, with an injured expression in his tones. "Durned ef I wasn't 'most ready fer to git onpatient—but it's all right now! Jest ontie my dukes an' trotters, an' let me pound thunder an' blue blazes out o' the chuckle-headed galoots as trussed me up this-a-way and wouldn't listen to reason—"

A sharp, insolent laugh cut him short.

"Don't grow excited, my dear fellow!" drawled the gambler, sitting down on a rock before his captive. "Business before pleasure is my motto, and I want a little talk with you before I turn you loose to chaw up the boys."

"I never could talk wuth a cent with my han's in limbo."

"I reckon you can talk enough to satisfy my needs, when you understand that your life depends upon it," significantly. "I haven't much time to waste in idle palavering. Tell me—who the devil are you, anyhow?"

The question came out like a shot, as though the gambler hoped to receive an answer by taking the captive unawares.

"You said it!" with a low chuckle. "The devil—more polite, the Old Boy—more politer, Professor Joralemon Giltedge Quack. Kin I say any plainer?"

"If not, I wouldn't give much for your lease of life," tartly retorted the gambler. "Look here. You seem to know a good deal about me, and about my past life. If so, you should know that I am not a man who sticks at trifles. I caused your capture. You were brought here by my orders. So far as you are concerned, my will here is law, stronger than gospel. If I say, wipe this rascal from off the face of the earth you wouldn't be given time to breathe a prayer. You would die, and vanish from mortal sight forever."

"Kill the devil, hey? Good Lawd! your feller sinners'd raise a monument to you fer that so big an' tall that rain'd never fall on its tip-top!"

Carl Sherwood flushed hotly at this mocking speech, and his eyes blazed wickedly as he leaned forward, hissing:

"True as we both live and breathe at this moment, I'll pronounce that sentence, unless you answer me—"

"Ain't I answerin' of ye, the best I know how?" with an injured look of mild reproach. "Kin I answer when you don't ax any questions? You're lunny, man, or else you hain't got over your last night's drunk—durned ef I kin tell which!"

"Where did you get that ace of diamonds?"

"Out o' the hand you dealt me," was the instant reply.

"You lie!" with a snarl that revealed the white, pointed teeth. "I had not set eyes on that card for twenty-odd years, yet I recognized it instantly—"

"Sorter doubled ye up with the cholery morgidge, too, didn't it?" chuckled the professor. "Never see a man tuck with the collywobbus more sudden in all my perfunctory experience, then you was with that holey ace! Couldn't 'a' keeled over no purtier ef it hed bin pinned jest over your gizzard an' that hole drilled with a 'volver—no sir!"

With a violent effort Carl Sherwood recovered his composure, and his voice betrayed not the faintest trace of emotion or excitement, as he spoke again, slowly, impressively:

"I know pretty well who and what you are, my good fellow. I know that you are a detective. That you think you have struck a bonanza, if you can only throw dust in my eyes long enough to take me prisoner. But you made a false move at the outset. You wanted to be too sure, to make a dramatic climax. As a natural consequence, you are in limbo, and I am your captor—your executioner, if you like the term any better!"

"Still, I cannot comprehend how you came in possession of that card. You were not one of those present—"

"Don't be too dead sure, boss!" chuckled the Old Boy.

"What do you mean? Speak out! Who are you?"

"S'pose I'd say—the ghost o' Harold Laurent?" slowly.

"Bah!" with a mocking laugh. "You will be a ghost in reality, if you crowd me too far. There—enough nonsense!"

"I'll have the truth out of you, or I'll turn you over to the Rustlers as a sacrifice to the manes of their chief. I'll give you just four-

and twenty hours to confess. At the end of that period it will be too late. I swear this by all that men hold holy!"

Turning around, Sherwood called to Dan Abbles, who had promptly retreated as soon as his partner came on the scene.

"Dan, the old fool—hal!" and he leaned forward, twining one finger in the flowing white locks, and giving a quick, severe jerk, as though expecting to pull off a wig, but without success. "The devil!" he muttered, frowning. "I made sure it was false—but no matter, Dan!"

"Yas, pard," grunted the ruffian, swallowing a grin.

"This old rascal won't talk, and I can't lose any more time on him now. I leave him in your charge. If he concludes to make a clean breast of it, any time before this hour tomorrow, send for me. Mind you, I say send. I know that he can't mesmerize you, but there's no telling what he might do with the other boys."

"The p'izen critter tried that, but slipped up onto it, bad!" grinned the squat Hercules.

"Don't take your eyes off him for a minute. Don't trust to his bonds. He's a slippery devil, and if he should escape it would be all day with you and I. You understand?"

"What I'm to do ef he wants to 'fess; but ef he don't?"

"When the time expires turn him over to the boys, and let them exercise their pistols on him—but make sure that he's killed. Then come down to town, and we'll get to more paying work. Tie up his eyes. Keep a sharp lookout. If any one should stumble along and try to set him free, kill them and him too!"

Without another word Carl Sherwood turned away, mounted his horse, and galloped down the gulch at reckless speed.

Dan Abbles replaced the bandage over the professor's eyes, and, pistol in hand, resumed his watchful vigil.

CHAPTER XXI.

PETER COMES AND THE OLD BOY GOES.

UNHEEDING the hysterical cries and tears of his Nancy, bearing naught save that imperious demand for his presence, Peter Papagon stalked through the town and out into the desert, following true along the trail of the retreating Rustlers, though he knew it not. He only knew that his master was calling him, was guiding each step that he took, that he had no option save to render prompt and unquestioning obedience.

On for hour after hour, following the capricious windings of the canyons and gulches, stalking swiftly, solemnly, until drawing near to the rendezvous of the Rustlers. Then, after a momentary hesitation, as though he hardly comprehended what his master wished, Peter Papagon sunk down amid the rocks and pulled off his heavy boots, then stole along up the gulch with all the silence and caution of an Indian warrior out on a spying expedition.

Lazily leaning with his back against a rock, sat one of the Rustlers, ostensibly keeping watch and ward over the winding trail, but long immunity rendered him careless, and his eyes were sleepily watching the slowly-moving, constantly-changing clouds far above, a low, musical whistle parting his lips. His dull ears heard nothing of the faint rustle among the scrubby sage, the occasional displacement of a pebble. His sleepy eyes saw naught of the human form which, snake-like, crept toward him from one side, with eyes dull and glassy in their unvarying stare; with face vacant and expressionless—a living, breathing, automaton, whose motions were guided by the bound and blindfolded prisoner lying rods away, seemingly helpless, doomed to suffer death ere another day was spent.

Nearer and nearer creeps that strangely actuated scout. The drowsy sentinel sees the fleecy clouds fade out of sight. His whistling becomes fainter and more irregular, then ceases altogether—for he sleeps. A sleep that shall know no waking this side the grave—poor sinner!

Closer and closer—then silently rising to its full height, with a heavy, round "nigger-head" gripped between his huge hands, the human automaton hurled the rock true as fate.

A soul-sickening crushing sound, and the luckless sentinel was off duty forever!

Peter turned away, without the slightest change in his stolid countenance, but hesitated, then turned back and stooping over the quivering mass, took from its belt the knife and revolver, thrusting them under his own belt as he resumed his silent, stealthy crawl up the gulch.

Dan Abbles, gripping the stem of a stumpy pipe between his square, bull-dog jaws, sat with elbows on knees and chin supported by his united palms, only a few yards away from the bound and blindfolded form of the Old Boy of Tombstone, staring sullenly at his motionless charge.

"I'd give a heap to know jest who an' what the p'izen critter is!" ran through his sluggish brain. "I'm a-doubtin' that thar's more into it then pard let me hev a squint at. He ain't acted a mite nat'ral ever sence we struck this durn section. That wo'an critter hes bewitched him, fer one thing. This ongainly j'int-snake of

a feller did the rest. But that ain't a goin' to trouble long. Wish't the shemale varmint was as easy to git shet of! They ain't no luck into wimmen, anyhow— Come out o' that you boy!" he suddenly ejaculated, turning his head toward a little clump of mingled brush and rock a few feet to the left.

His keen ear had caught the crackling of a twig, and as he glanced in that direction, he saw the form of a man, and supposing it to be one of the Rustlers, he called out these words, never dreaming of the truth, all ignorant of the terrible doom which was even then being pronounced upon him by the motionless lips of the Old Boy of Tombstone.

But if his ears could not hear the command, those of the mesmerized giant were filled with the merciless words:

"Leap upon him—grip his throat—let not a sound escape as you strangle the dog! On him, Peter Papagon! Kill him—choke him—save the hangman a job!"

Out from the bushes in the deepening twilight leaped the unconscious slayer, his knees striking the surprised guard in the side and hurling him over, even as those huge hands closed around his bull-neck with desperate force, s'utting off all outcry, and with it all breath.

Not two men in a thousand could have mastered Dan Abbles with naked hands, even with the advantage of a surprise, without his being able to give the alarm to his mates; but Peter Papagon was that one man. To his own enormous powers, was added all the iron will of the bound man. His weight had crushed in the gambler's ribs. His steadily contracting fingers were swiftly completing the work, and though the doomed gambler struggled with all his power, those struggles were rapidly growing weaker. One, two, three minutes. Only a quivering of the sturdy limbs—the face a horrible sight. Yet still the human automaton maintained his deadly grip, awaiting the further command of his master.

Eagerly enough the Old Boy of Tombstone listened, his ears having to perform double duty. He realized the peril of delay. At any moment some one of the Rustlers might come that way and see Peter Papagon at his death-work. And yet, should he give the command to release the fellow, he might be able to give the alarm. He knew that Peter would instantly obey. But he knew, too, that the man could only act, not reason, while under the spell. Still he must take the chances.

"Let up on your grip, Peter," he whispered, low, but plain to the giant as though pronounced in thunder notes. "Take his knife an' set me free—cut the ropes an' take the rag off'm my eyes—lively, boy Peter!"

Ten seconds later he was free, so far as bonds were concerned, eagerly glancing around him, after a single glance at the motionless form of the gambler. One glance was sufficient. Death was written in each distorted feature. Dan Abbles was off duty forever.

"Back into the bresh, Peter, an' lay low!" muttered the Old Boy, rapidly stripping the belt of weapons from the body of the gambler, and strapping it around his own waist.

He crept silently along through the gathering darkness until he could peer into the camp of the Rustlers. He could see them busily engaged in preparing their evening meal, and knew that many minutes would not elapse before some one of their number would carry food to Dan Abbles, when the death and release must be discovered.

For a moment or two he remained motionless, his keen eyes sweeping over the ground beyond. Then he silently ordered his huge slave to follow close, and crept noiselessly through the darkness to where he could hear the horses feeding and trampling on the hard soil.

Into the midst of the little cavalcade he crept, selecting two of the best animals, and twisting rude Mameluke bridles out of the severed lariats. Then, at a sign, Peter Papagon mounted one, while he leaped upon the back of the other, and faced toward the camp-fires.

"Yell and shoot, Peter—sock it to 'em, clean up to the han'le!" he screamed, urging his mount forward, working his pistols so rapidly that a steady stream of fire poured from his outstretched hands.

At his side thundered the giant, his pistols cracking, his lion-voice roaring, as the two wild riders plunged into the midst of the Rustlers, close followed by the stampeding cavalcade. Yells of terror, shrieks of bitter agony, groans of dying men—the clatter of iron-shod hoofs, the scattering of firebrands, showers of ascending sparks—a shrill, mocking laugh—and then down the gulch dashed the two men, with the terror-stricken horses close following.

Before them liberty and revenge. Behind them death, terror, utter confusion.

Out of the gulch into the valley. Through the valley and out upon the desert. Over the desolate, sandy waste, heading for Tombstone, rode the two men, master and slave, the brain of one working swiftly, plotting to thoroughly discomfit his deadly, daring enemy, to carry to completion the subtle plot which had caused him so many sleepless hours; the other a dull, unreasoning blank for the time being.

The stampeding horses had long ago scattered and dropped out of sight, but still the two men urged on their steeds, as though riding for heavy stakes—as one of them surely was: on without a moment's pause, until the town was reached.

Drawing rein, the Old Boy dismounted, and bade Peter go to his home, to awaken from the spell when his head touched his rude pillow. Without a word the giant moved away, while the Old Boy strode straight into Dianthe's Bower.

One swift glance showed him that Carl Sherwood was playing at the faro table, where Dianthe dealt, and drawing a note book from his pocket, he hastily wrote a few lines, tore out the leaf, folded it, gave it with a golden coin to one of the men in the room, bidding him hand it to Carl Sherwood.

The man obeyed, slipping away before the astonished gambler could ask him any questions. Without the faintest suspicion of what the paper contained, Sherwood unfolded it and glanced at the contents. Despite his iron nerve a cry of angry surprise escaped his lips, causing Dianthe to suspend her dealing, with an anxious look.

"Read that!" muttered the gambler, hoarsely, tossing the note over the table, unheeding the surprise of his fellow players.

"FRANK ARNOLD, alias CARL SHERWOOD:—

"You called on me this afternoon. I am about to return the compliment. In just fifteen minutes from the time you read these words, I will make my bow to your highness. When that interview is ended, either you or I will be a corpse. I could kill you now, as mercilessly as you murdered Harold Laurent, two-and-twenty years ago, but I will give you a show for your life, if you are not too great a coward to accept the conditions. Once you wagered your life on a card. Dare you do so to-night?"

"Your deadly enemy, and master,
THE OLD BOY OF TOMBSTONE."

These the words that Dianthe read, with a strange glittering in her eyes. She motioned her dealer to take her place at the table, and drew aside with Carl Sherwood, heedless of the wondering and significant glances which followed them.

"You will accept this bold challenge? You must!" she impetuously added, as Sherwood hesitated. "You have bungled most wretchedly, somehow, but there's no time to ask how. You must meet and conquer this fellow—it is our last hope!"

"If he should win—" hesitated the gambler. "I'll answer for that. Meet him boldly. Play if he demands it. You shall win the game—I swear it!"

CHAPTER XXII.

WAGERING LIFE AGAINST LIFE.

PROMPTLY at the expiration of the period named in his note, the Old Boy of Tombstone entered the gaming-room of Dianthe's Bower, his eyes glittering vividly, his lips wreathed with a peculiar smile as he advanced toward Carl Sherwood, close to whose shoulder stood Dianthe, pale, her lips tightly compressed, her brow wrinkled with deep anxiety.

As the gambler saw that the hands of his mysterious foe were empty, as he failed to note the presence of any weapon, his right hand fell to the ready pistol on his hip, but before he could do more, Dianthe caught his arm, hissing sharply:

"Are you mad? Shoot him without a fair chance for his life, and you would be strung up to a sign-post the next minute! Be a man, and trust in me!"

The Old Boy of Tombstone saw the motion, and with a mocking laugh, he shook one black finger at the gambler, his shrill, peculiar voice startling all in the room:

"You dassen't do it, Carl Sherwood, big a coward as you be! You're a skeered to pull on a man who ain't got his weapon out, when thar's so many feller-critters lookin' on, though you ain't a mite too good to hit a man in the back, ef you ketched him alone an' off his guard."

"What do you mean?" snarled Sherwood, growing pale as a corpse with rage. "Take back those words, or I'll thrust them down your lying throat!"

"I want to know!" drawled the Old Boy, with a tantalizing smile. "Raal ferocious, ain't ye? Jest thirstin' fer belud, I reckon! Didn't git enough in here last night—No ye don't!"

Carl Sherwood, knowing it would be certain death to him, should the actual facts of the tragedy of the past evening leak out, caught at his revolver, but before he could cock or raise it, two black-gloved hands were outstretched, each one gripping a revolver.

"Shove back that tool, my honey, less you want me to fill ye too full o' holes to skin! I don't want to kill ye—jest yet; but I'll hev to do it, ef you act so pesky keerless any more—I will, fer a scan'alous fact!"

"Keep your foul tongue within bounds then," sullenly muttered the gambler, replacing his pistol. "What do you want of me, anyhow? If you have any business to transact, spit it out! If not, walk outside with me for one minute, and we'll settle the question of which one of us has the most coward's blood in his veins!"

"I kin tell ye a better way then that, honey," cheerfully retorted the Old Boy of Tombstone, his weapons vanishing with a swift movement, no man save himself could say just where or how. "Es I hed the 'stinguished honor to tell ye in that note, a bit ago, one of us two goes out o' this shebang toes-fust, cold meat, coyote bait, buzzard grub; take your choice!"

"Name your terms. The less talk the better."

"Fer you, mebbe," smilingly. "But some o' these gents mought hurt thar brains tryin' to puzzle out what in thunder we two was squabblin' about. That'd be a monstrous pity, which it makes my heart bleed jest fer to think of."

"Ma'am, and you gents. Len' me your ears fer a moment—I'll give 'em back good as ever in just two minutes by the watch. Thar's a little story which I want to whisper. All set."

"Twenty two year ago, thar or tharabouts, two men was playin' keards down in Orleans. Fer big stakes, too. None o' your pickayune gambollers, they wasn't—no sir!"

"They was stakin' life ag'inst life, an' one lost. Did he squall? N't any! He was grit clean through. He jest stood up with the keerd which hed won the game ag'inst him, pinned it over his heart, an' told the other man to fire."

"He did fire. Sent his lead dead center. Cut the spot out o' the keerd. It was the ace o' di'monds. Some o' you may hev seen me show it up in a little game here the other night. That was the same keerd. An' the man who pulled the trigger, stan's thar. Carl Sherwood he calls hisself now. That night he was Frank Arnold."

"What the devil has all this got to do with our quarrel?" savagely demanded the gambler, his eyes blazing. "Who are you?"

"Who am I?" echoed the old boy, drawing his tall form up to its greatest height. "The man who pinned that keerd onto his breast! The ghost o' Harold Laurent, come back from purgatory, to ha'nt you fer that shot—to take vengeance on the cowardly cheat who stole the keards which showed him winner!"

A buzz of excited interest ran through the room, at this astonishing announcement, but it subsided as Carl Sherwood broke into a hard, metallic laugh of scorn.

"Bah! Harold Laurent was a gentleman. You are nothing but a contemptible fraud—a strolling mountebank!"

"Mountebank enough fer this: to jest everlastingly mount you, an' bust your bank wide open!" chuckled the Old Boy.

"But, s'pose we let compliments slide fer the present, an' git down to business? I say ag'in that I'm the ghost o' Harold Laurent, come back from the bloody grave to play that game over ag'in. Ef you ain't the dirty coward the past says you be, you'll give me the chance, life, ag'inst life, the winner to shoot the loser through the heart."

"Suppose I refuse? What are you going to do about it?"

"You dassen't—to the fust. Fer the last—I'll jst roll up the curtain an' show this lady an' these gents, the sort o' life you've led ever sence you murdered Harold Laurent, by stealin' keards. I'll tell 'em jest the part you—"

"You have uttered lies enough already, to seal your fate a thousand times over," sharply interrupted the gambler. "I have borne with your insolence long enough. I did think you a fool or a madman. I think so yet. But no man can blame me if I punish you according to your own terms. Name them. My life against yours—and be sure I will claim the forfeit the moment I have won!"

"Durn fool ef you didn't; but you'll never win; an' ef you should, you couldn't kill a ghost—which is me!"

"Enough talk!" sharply interposed Dianthe, pale, but with blazing eyes. "Either drop this shameful wrangle, once for all, or settle it by acts, not words."

"That's business, an' hits me jest whar I live!" declared the Old Boy, bowing low. "Ef you ain't a coward, Carl Sherwood, you'll play 'at stealin' game over. Seven-up. One rub. My life ag'inst yours. The loser to pin the ace o' di'monds over his heart, an' the winner to hev a fa'r shot at it, across the table the game is played on. Kin ye stan' it, honey?"

"Gentlemen," said Sherwood, coldly, "you see that this affair has been forced upon me. I don't want to kill this crazy fool, but if I hold back any longer, some among you may think that I am lacking in sand. At the same time, if I win, I swear to kill the fellow, if I am lynched the next moment!"

"An' ef you be, I'll ha'nt them what hauls on the rope tell they can't rest!" chuckled the Old Boy of Tombstone. "But, don't git oneasy, honey. It ain't on the keards fer you to win, an' it's writ that I'm to do the trigger-pullin' this bout."

"Bring a fresh pack of cards, Morgan!" cried Dianthe, then turning to the rivals, she added, coldly: "You have not consulted my wishes nor my convenience in this little affair, gentlemen, but all the same I'm going to see that it is carried out on the square. Put your weapons

on that table. Craig, you will see that neither of them retain any arms."

In silence the two men submitted to being searched and disarmed, the weapons being placed on the faro-table.

"There will need to be but one shot fired, if the conditions are honestly carried out," added Dianthe, drawing a revolver and discharging four chambers into the ceiling. "I have left that load in this tool. You can see that it is a Smith & Wesson, 38 caliber, double action. Do you both agree to use it? To my acting as judge? Forget that I am a woman, and if you have any objections, name them frankly."

Both hastened to assure the gambler queen that they were perfectly satisfied, and she motioned them to a table which stood close to the rear wall, where it could not be surrounded by the intensely interested crowd.

"You will play here. I will see that you are not annoyed by any remarks from the outsiders. When the rubber is ended, I will give the winner the pistol. The rest lies with him."

The wrapper was torn from the cards, and the game began.

There was little of interest, outside of the stakes for which they were playing so coolly, pertaining to either of the first two games, at the end of which the score stood even.

Not a sound broke the painful stillness as the third and deciding game was begun, with the Old Boy of Tombstone dealing. The hands ran poorly, the dealer making two, Sherwood one. The next deal was but a repetition, save that the counts were reversed. Again the Old Boy dealt, making jack and game, while his adversary counted high and low, the score a tie at five.

Sherwood was white as a corpse as he saw this, and recalled that game of the far past, which this so startlingly resembled even to the score on either side! But the Old Boy still smiled genially, as he watched the white fingers shuffle the cards, and as he reached out to cut them it could be seen that his hand was steady as fate.

At that moment one of the spectators uttered a wild yell and fell to the floor, writhing as though in death-agony. The Old Boy started and turned his head. Dianthe bent forward and swiftly exchanged the cards on the table for a fresh pack, the action being performed so deftly that only Sherwood saw it.

"It is an epileptic fit. The poor fellow is subject to them, and the excitement brought this on. Look to him, Morgan; and you, gentlemen, finish your game," said Dianthe, coldly.

Sherwood dealt the cards, never glancing at his hand until the Old Boy of Tombstone scanned his and legged.

"Play!" said Sherwood, swiftly running over his cards.

"You win, honey; hain't got a trump to my name!" coolly uttered the Old Boy, facing his cards. "Show a trump keerd, an' you kin git down to trigger-pullin' jest as soon's ye like!"

Sherwood flung down his hand—ace and deuce of trumps among them!—his eyes blazing with a satanic triumph.

"Give me that pistol, madam. Stand up, dog!"

"Wait till I find the ace o' di'monds," coolly retorted the loser, running over the cards and extracting the one named.

"Thar she be! Now let flicker! Bet ye miss the keerd!" mockingly cried the Old Boy.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when Carl Sherwood leveled the weapon, handed him by Dianthe, and fired.

A yell of triumph burst from his lips as through the blue smoke he saw a bloody blotch spread over the card; but the Old Boy of Tombstone did not fall—spoke still more mockingly:

"You cain't kill a ghost, honey! Didn't I tell ye so?"

A cry of horror swiftly changed to one of rage, as he felt the chilling touch, and heard the sharp click of handcuffs closing on his wrists; then the voice of Dianthe:

"I arrest you for murder, Frank Arnold!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

BRUSHING AWAY THE COWARDS.

CARL SHERWOOD staggered like a drunken man as he heard these words, and turned his white, scared face toward Dianthe.

One hand clasped his shoulder. The other held him covered with a cocked revolver. The blue eyes glittered with a deadly intensity. There was no mistaking the terrible truth. This woman whom he had learned to love so madly, was his enemy! She had betrayed him, even when seeming to further his bold plans! The pistol had not been loaded with balls! With a choking groan, he sank to the floor.

"Back!" cried Dianthe, waving her weapon toward the excited crowd. "Keep your distance! I am acting in the interests of law and justice. This man is a criminal, and I have arrested him. Close in, men! If there is any attempt at rescue, strike hard and strike sure!"

With drawn weapons, half a score men closed around her, forming a compact circle

with the trembling, almost senseless gambler for a center, supported by a couple of their number.

"You shall have a full and satisfactory explanation in the morning, gentlemen," added Dianthe, as her body-guard moved toward the door. "Until then, keep your distance, or somebody will surely get hurt."

"Which is the gospel o' Dianthy the Oneth, an' the clean, solid truth, chuck-up!" declared the Old Boy of Tombstone, unpinning the blood-stained card from his breast and tossing it on the table, then following the body-guard out of the hall.

Bewildered, unable to comprehend all that lay beneath these sudden changes, but still curious, the crowd flocked around the table to scan the card. Its center was covered with blood, but there was no bullet-hole!

A half score men stationed around the little building which Dianthe had occupied since her arrival at Tombstone. Each man armed to the teeth, keen-eyed and on the alert.

Inside, four persons. Upon the bed, the curtains of which were looped aside, lay poor Will Avery, looking like the ghost of his old self. Pale as a corpse, his face thin and drawn, as though from a long illness, his eyes deep-sunken, but bright almost to feverishness as he listened with varying emotions to the swift, impassioned speech of the central figure—that of the woman whom we have known as the gambler queen.

Nearer the door stood the tall figure of the Old Boy of Tombstone, his white face stern and hard-set, his blue eyes filled with a light that was deadly in its hatred as he, too, listened to the tragic record of the far-away past.

In a chair, his head bowed upon his chest, manacles on his wrists and ankles, Carl Sherwood also listened, seemingly the least concerned of all. There was a dull, listless expression in his eyes, of dazed stupidity on his face.

Dianthe told the story of that old rivalry, culminating in the death of Harold Laurent, of the father of his young bride, of the assault upon the slayer by the crazed woman, whose life he had wrecked. All this the captive listened to without moving a muscle, but as she continued there came a gleam of light into his eyes and a quivering of his muscles.

"The body drawn from the bay was identified and buried; but those who sorrowed over that corpse were deceived. Myrtle Laurent did not die then and there.

"A negro found her wandering in the swamp, many miles from the city. He was a runaway slave, who had belonged to the Ayres plantation, and he recognized his young mistress, though she was insane. He took her to an island in the swamp, where a few of his people had gathered, and with his wife nursed the poor creature back to health—not sanity. They knew nothing of what had happened. They dared make no inquiries, for fear of being caught and punished with the lash. They kept Myrtle Laurent with them—and on that island in the dismal swamp two babes first drew the breath of life!"

Carl Sherwood raised his head and cast a swift glance into the face of the speaker, then toward the motionless figure in black near the door. He began to comprehend all now!

Rapidly Dianthe told her story, entering into many details, for which there is no room at this late hour.

She told how the insane woman recovered her senses when the twins were born; how her health and strength came back to her, even there in the miasmatic swamps, living, as she said, for vengeance on the murderer of her husband and father; of how the faithful blacks took them out of the swamps and down on one of the Florida keys, where they lived in seclusion, all the more peacefully because of the terrible war which raged between North and South; of how the children were reared with only one aim in life—that of hunting down the slayer of their father, when they should gain strength sufficient to cope with him; of how they practiced shooting, fencing, card-playing with their half-crazed mother; of how she discovered the marvelous amount of animal magnetism which the boy possessed, and how she led him to cultivate this, to practice it day after day, together with sleight-of-hand cunning.

Death came to her one day, and the avengers set forth on their mission. Step by step they tracked their victim, storing up certain proof of many a crime—to run him to earth in Tombstone.

"You swallowed the cunning bait which I gilded for you, poor fool! You came; you believed the tale I told you about my robbing the coach and needing you as a partner. I still lacked a few links in the chain, and by gaining your confidence I gained them as well. Then I dealt the blow. You are here, bound, helpless. The hangman shall strike those manacles off when he takes you to the scaffold.

"On only one score have I the faintest regret for the part I have forced myself to play, turning toward the man who had given his life for her freedom, her hands outstretched, and a passionate love in every tone, every feature.

"From the day we first met I have loved you, Will Avery, with all my soul—never so dearly as when I felt obliged to repulse you, to carry out the solemn oath I uttered when kneeling at the bedside of my mother. I make what amends I can. I tell you this. I beg you to be more merciful to me than I have been to you. Will, my king, I love you, I love you!"

With a gasping cry, the wounded man straightened up in bed, his face glorified, his arms outstretched. Dianthe leaped forward, their arms entwined around each other, their lips met, then parted, Dianthe uttering a low, gasping wail as she sunk senseless to the floor.

And Will Avery fell back, a corpse.

On the morrow Harold Laurent—the Old Boy of Tombstone no longer—kept the promise given by his sister, once Dianthe, now Myrtle Laurent. He told the tragic tale. He showed the papers which authorized them to arrest Frank Arnold for murder, robbery, forgery, or any one of a score other crimes.

He paid a visit to Peter Papagon, and the twain were soon on good terms. Together they surprised Nancy Topack, and when Harold Laurent departed, in Nancy's wet apron lay money enough to carry out their cherished plans, which they proceeded to do without any delay. They never regretted it either, though the neighbors do say that the big, honest fellow is most shamefully henpecked. But if he enjoys it, need we complain?

Frank Arnold was taken back to the States, tried and convicted of murder. Those who had trailed him to death waited until the sentence was put into execution, then vanished from sight of those who had known them as Dianthe, the gambler queen, and Professor Joralemon Giltedge Quack, the Old Boy of Tombstone, as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed them up.

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